

# **Hifi Pig** **EXTRA**

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"Ommadawn"



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## MERRILL AUDIO MONOBLOC AMPS



**After reviewing the Merrill Audio Veritas monobloc power amplifiers in January 2015 Stuart Smith auditioned the American company's \$4800 Thor amps.**

I've had the Thor amps now for around the six month mark and they've been doing a great job in the main system having become our reference and so I thought it about time that I finally got around to writing a few words about them for you.

Regular readers will remember I reviewed the [Merrill Audio Veritas](#) amps back in January of 2015 commenting "Hard to fault in my opinion but I just don't give perfect tens. Had I the means to buy the review amps I certainly would." Sadly my financial situation

didn't allow me to make the purchase and so, after speaking with Merrill and him assuring me that the Thors, despite their much more achievable pricepoint offered up a good percentage of what the Veritas would...he also mentioned that many people have found distinguishing the two very difficult. Let's scotch this one from the off...the Thors are not ultimately as good as the Veritas, but they're not far off and they cost a lot less, with the Veritas costing \$12 000 and the Thors costing \$4 800 for a pair.

# MERRILL AUDIO MONOBLOC AMPS

The Thors use Hypex Ncore tech in the UcD Modules and the cases are, like the Veritas, milled from a solid billet of aircraft grade aluminium. Commercially they are available in a high gloss black finish (mine are a unique pair in opalescent white) and they are pretty dinky affairs measuring just 23cm x 23cm and stand just

9cm high including their Stillpoints. Along the front in pretty subtle lettering is milled THOR and round the back you have the Furutech IEC mains input, a Cardas XLR input that is Silver with Rhodium plate and the absolutely brilliant (in my opinion) Cardas patented speaker binding post that are Rhodium over Copper... I said it in the review of the Veristas, but I reckon these are without a doubt the best way of connecting spade connectors to your amp! Underneath each amp you have the muting button which glows red when on and looks pretty cool reflecting off

**However, put down your prejudices and realise that Class D has come a long way in recent years and is not what you may assume it to be.**

the marble slabs I have the amps standing on. A note here is that you must not play about with connections etc even when the amps are muted and you must ensure they are disconnected from the mains!

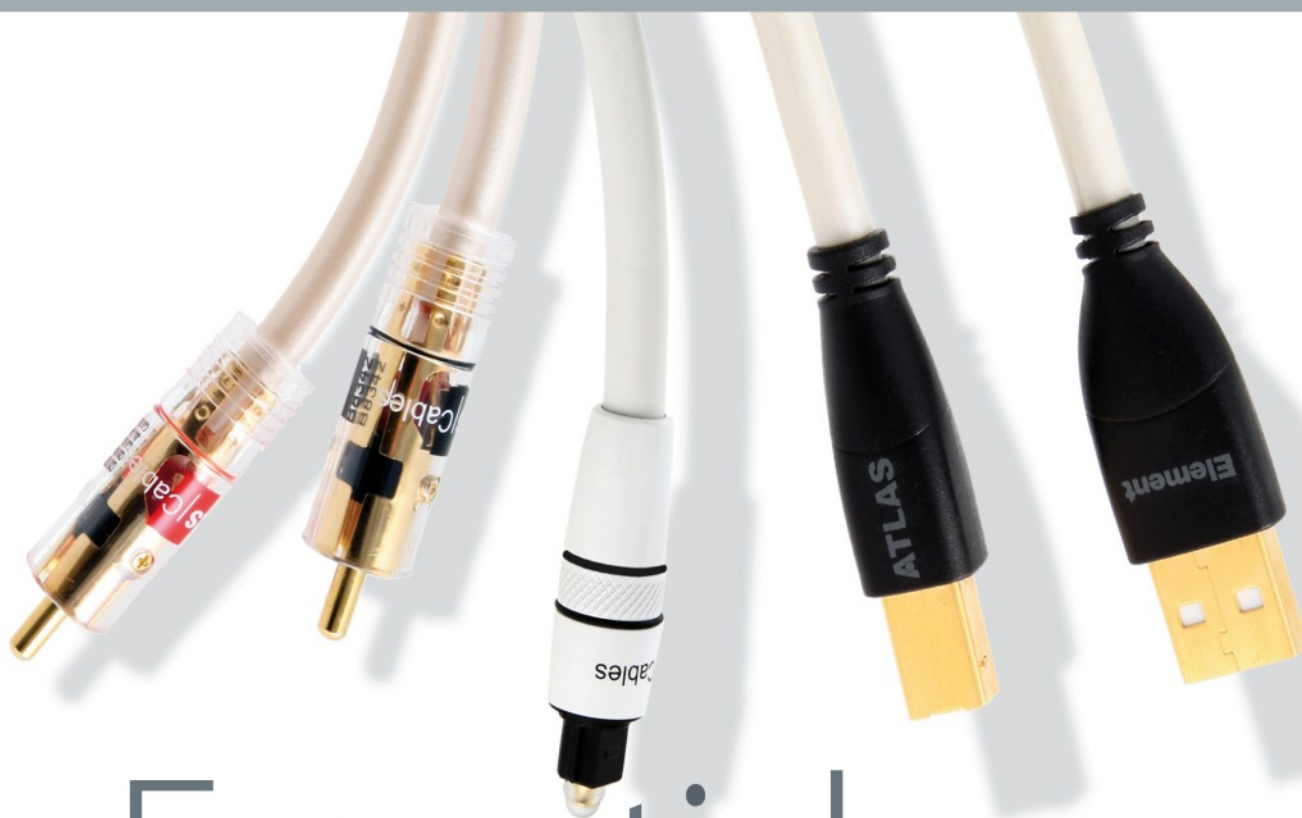
Power output is rated at 200 Watts into 8 Ohms and 400 into 4 but they can be double-height bridged for 700 Watts into 4 Ohms.

## THE SOUND

These are Class D amps and I know from experience and reading the various Facebook groups that this technology does not find favour with everyone. However, put down your prejudices and realise that Class D has come a long way in recent years and is not what you may assume it to be. Class D amps have a reputation of being bass light and favouring the midband,







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# MERRILL AUDIO MONOBLOC AMPS

but that's just not the case with these specific amplifiers. I've used them with a wide range of loudspeakers (Triangle, hORNS Mummy, Audio Physic Avanti 3 and the Avantgarde Duo XDs) and I've never found them lacking in the bass at all... I'll expand on this in a bit.

I'm not going to babble on about a whole load of specific tunes I've listened to with the Thors in place as I've listened to just about every genre you could imagine (sadly no Mongolian throat singing but I'm working on that) with them over the months and they seem to perform equally well with everything.

Like the Veritas amps what you do immediately notice is an absolutely silent background, particularly when using a passive pre (I used the Bespoke Audio and Music First Baby Reference passives). This was an interesting observation on my part because I thought I needed to have my Coffman Labs valve pre in front of the Thors to stop them sounding cold and sterile...this is clearly not the case. What you do get is a beautiful clarity of sound that is just sparkingly clear throughout the frequency range. The Thors don't have that certain indefinable quality that the Veritas had but the flavour (or lack of it) is the same and partnered with the passive pre amplifiers I mentioned these are "high-fidelity" in the strictest sense of the word, neither adding nor taking away much at all. Let's wheel out the hifi reviewer clichés shall we...

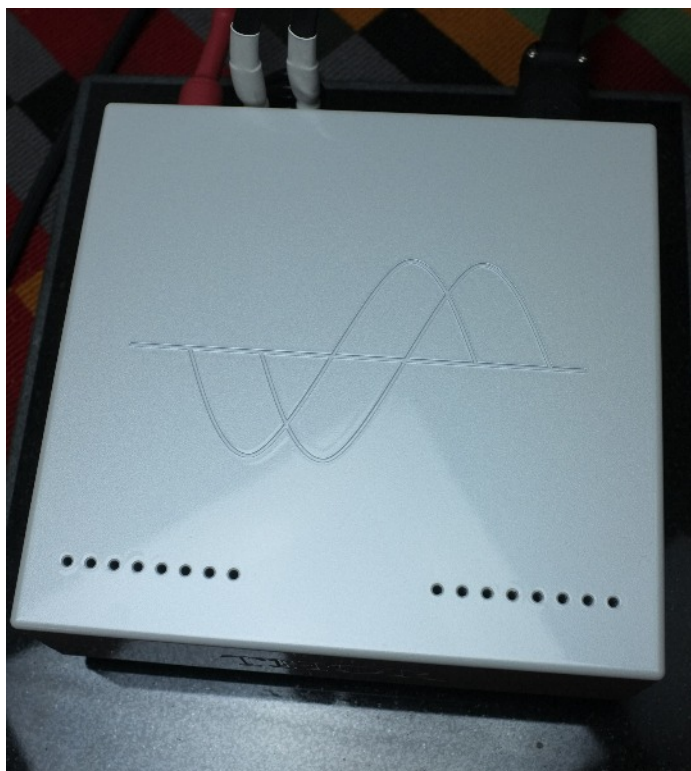


"an open window to the recording", "veils lifted", "see through to the source transparency"... you get the picture I think. This clarity of sound allows you to get the most out of your chosen music and brings you closer to the original recording than I've experienced with more conventional amplifiers. It also allows you to change components up stream and be immediately aware of the different seasoning these changes bring to the cocktail.

You'll be well aware that we like to play pretty loud and you can crank the Thors up to pretty realistic levels with the right speakers, but you don't get the impression that the flavour of their presentation changes at all...there's just more volume and that same clarity right to the point where you know you need to turn it down or the neighbours are going to be hammering on the door.

The Thors are also fast amps in the sense that they will play quiet to loud bits in your music without missing a beat and the bass is also fast and taut... I like taut bass and anything that doesn't deliver in this department gets the cold shoulder immediately from me. Deep Purples 'Smoke On The Water' was a real treat when the bass guitar comes in, as was our other bass test track from Hardfloor. Drums have slam, hats are crisp and the spatial bits within the mix are all there in front of you. Soundstage and imaging is predominantly a factor of your loudspeaker choice in my honest opinion, but with the Thors in place there is the feeling that imaging is tack sharp and accurate...this is another must for me!

Real instruments sounded real across the board and electronic music had the requisite pace and rhythm with the Thors plumbed into the rig. As I'm writing this I get the impression that the words I'm using suggest a cold and sanitary sound, but that's not the





# MERRILL AUDIO MONOBLOC AMPS



case I don't think. A double bass sounds warm and fat (as does synthesised bass) but then hats are steely and razor sharp...what I'm saying, perhaps badly, is that the Thors add little to nothing to the tonality of an instrument allowing it to be what it is and given the silent backdrop the

Thors afford you get to hear all the attack and decay of an instrument.

These would be great tools in a studio environment I reckon, but they also do their job in the home setting. They are that "open window" and as such crap recordings will sound crap, as will poor electronics before the amps. Let's be honest here and say that high fidelity (in the truest sense) is not always the end goal for audio enthusiasts and most like to add a bit of flavour to their set up (some prefer a warmer more

**Here's the thing... if you want to add colour to your set up at the amplifier link of the chain then you need to look elsewhere, if you want to have an amp that does little but amplify then you need to audition these.**

relaxed sound, whilst others may favour a faster more steely approach) and with the Thors in place (along with a suitable pre) you can tune to your tastes with the DAC or other source components...and of course your loudspeakers.

## CONCLUSION

The Merrill Thor amps look great, offer a clean and pure sound and cost less than half the price of the Veritas amps and as such I reckon they offer pretty decent value for money. For a reviewer they are a great tool as they just don't seem to add a great deal of character to the sound and so they are great for assessing other equipment. However, they are also eminently listenable in the home set up and I can honestly say that I've never listened to more music than I have with the Thors. They are an easy and yet accurate listen, with enough power to

# MERRILL AUDIO MONOBLOC AMPS

satisfy all but the most power hungry of speakers. Comparing them to the Veritas they don't seem to have quite the same dynamic quality I enjoyed so much, but they're really not far off not all.

Here's the thing... if you want to add colour to your set up at the amplifier link of the chain then you need to look elsewhere, if you want to have an amp that does little but amplify then you need to audition these. I have a lot of amps come and go and I like to hear what they bring to the table in terms of their character, but having the Thors in place just feels like I've slotted back in that tool that neither adds nor takes away very much and as such I heartily recommend them.

After writing this review I've just read through the review of the Veritas and the two are very similar indeed!

**Sound Quality: 8.85**

**Build: 9**

**Value: 9**

**Overall: 8.95**

**Price as reviewed \$4800**

**Pros :**

**Transparent and revealing**

**Fast and taut**

**Relatively good value**

**Cons :**

**Transparent and revealing**

**Not quite as dynamic as the Veritas**

**Stuart Smith**

## Designer's Notes

The Thor Monoblocks were conceptualized to provide a lower priced entry to the VERITAS Monoblocks while retaining as much as possible of the VERITAS Monoblocks. In creating these units, the power and the size were considered independently and coincidentally ended up being about half the price and half the power. When completed the Thors retain between 75% to 80% of the VERITAS Monoblocks characteristics.

The design was to still use Class D and very clean power supplies in which an SMPS power supply was

selected. The original boards are modified and the modifications were decided on by using focus groups that helped with the voicing of the Thor Monoblocks. The base technology is the UCD from Hypex with 75% of the Ncore technology implemented in this. This is then further modified by Merrill Audio for the final product.

The chambered Chassis is made from Aircraft grade Aluminum. It is CNC'ed out from a solid block of aluminum, then painted with high gloss Black car finish and baked. (The limited edition Pearl White Monoblocks were double baked). While it is small, the chassis is designed for good airflow to keep the internal operation cool.

As with the VERITAS, the high quality Cardas XLR, Cardas Patented Speaker binding posts and Furutech IEC is used. The Thors also provide for a remote trigger like the VERITAS. There is only 1 Speaker Binding post on the Thors instead of 2 like the VERITAS as the size limited the easy to use layout. Still-points Ultra mini risers are also provided and an upgrade to the Symposium Rollerblocks are provided. Part of the focus group was to test out different power cords to would provide a match to the Thors. Since we could not come up with a cost effective power cord that worked well, a custom power cord was build using Furutechs Silver plated 27 stranded pure copper wire and terminated with Cardas AC plugs. These are only available in US and Schuko. The Cardas plugs were chosen as it complimented the Furutech cable very well in sound.

Internally, silver plated, Teflon sleeved pure copper wire is used throughout from the power supply to the audio signal. All lines are kept as short as possible. A synergistic fuse is also included to improve the sound. The Fuse is not user accessible as the fuse is the protection of last resort. The synergistic fuse does affect the Sonics hence the extra cost was justified. The Thors have a slew of internal protections. Should all of them fail, then the fuse will blow. At this point the customer should return the units to see what has failed and have it corrected, which should be an extremely rare occurrence, should it happen.

We were more than please with the final result of the Thor Monoblocks that is being offered at a great price using the economies of scale and design derived from the VERITAS Monoblocks.

**Merrill Whettasinghe**



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# CABASSE STREAM 100 AMP & SURF LOUDSPEAKERS

**French based Cabasse make the renowned Sphère loudspeaker system, but they also produce more modestly priced items. Here Dominic Marsh takes a listen to the Stream 100 amplifier (£499) and Surf loudspeakers (£379)**

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**C**abasse Loudspeakers hail from France and have a long history of quality speaker manufacture, founded by Georges Cabasse in 1950. The Cabasse name goes even further back than that, with generations of the family engaged in building musical instruments since the 1700's and still in use today with many orchestras, much prized by their musician owners.

## CONSTRUCTION

### STREAM 100 AMPLIFIER

Weighing in at only 1.9kg, there is nothing lightweight in its performance, with a continuous power

rating of 50 watts per channel into an 8 ohms impedance. It measures some 21cm wide by 22cm deep (including speaker terminals) by 9cm high. The outer case is fabricated from black gloss Perspex on all sides except the rear panel, along the bottom edge of the Perspex runs a silver coloured alloy strip, inset into which is the front panel USB socket. To the rear we find the input and output connections, starting with the LAN Ethernet wired connection plus 'reset' and WPS buttons to synchronise the internet connection, a digital data input TOSLINK socket, 2 pairs of RCA analogue inputs, a trio of RCA analogue outputs to a pre-amp and subwoofer, then two banks of four (eight in total) speaker binding posts confusingly



# CABASSE STREAM 100 AMP & SURF LOUDSPEAKERS

labelled 1 to 4. The left bank of 4 binding posts is devoted to left speaker connections, while the right hand bank corresponds to the right speaker connections. Unusually too, the positive terminals and the negative terminals are arranged horizontally, so to connect one set of speakers you need to connect to the top pairs of binding posts in the horizontal plane only for left and right accordingly. A second pair of speakers can then be connected to the lower tier of binding posts in the same sequence, again arranged horizontally. Note the lack of SPDIF digital input terminal, although there isn't much space left on the rear panel for such an inclusion. To the left of the speaker terminals is a small switch which configures the amplifier for either 4 ohm or 8 ohm speakers. To complete the rear panel layout, we have an IEC power inlet socket without an earth pin which tells us it's a double insulated device, a mains protection fuse and a small fan. The Stream 100 is also configured for AptX Bluetooth connection.

Without any power applied, it appears to be a plain black Perspex box with

rounded corners and an alloy trim with the Cabasse legend screen printed onto the alloy strip, but power it up and a backlit display appears. It is also touch sensitive controlled with all functions available, so if the dog runs off with the remote control and buries it in the garden, you are not hamstrung by having a device that won't function. Talking of which, it is an oval or pebble shaped unit that adjusts volume, input selection and mute, which fits neatly in the hand and you have to look twice sometimes to make sure the

'right' end is pointed at the amplifier due to its symmetrical shape.

The Stream 100 amplifier has a retail price at time of review at £499.00.

## SURF LOUDSPEAKER

A fairly compact enclosure measuring 29cm high by 17.5cm wide by 22cm deep, with a tweeter measuring 27mm and a long throw 13cm bass driver with a rubber roll surround, the crosso-

ver frequency being 3,600Hz, with a frequency response envelope ranging from 65Hz to 23,000Hz. Power handling is said to be 65 watts continuous with a maximum short term peak of 450 watts so Cabasse say, with a quoted efficiency of 85dB for 1 watt of input measured at 1 metre on axis. There is a single pair of binding posts, so is not biwire or biamp capable. It is a reflex cabinet design with a rear facing port. Available in either piano gloss black or gloss white finishes,



the review pair submitted were finished in black gloss. A pair of protective perforated metal grilles is supplied, which fits snugly into vertical slotted recesses either side of the front baffle.

## SOUND QUALITY

I was rather pleased with the sound right at that first hearing, even knowing that both were factory fresh units and needed some running hours. The bass in particular was constrained somewhat so I left the pair

# Paint It Black

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**Tony Bolton**



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# CABASSE STREAM 100 AMP & SURF LOUDSPEAKERS

running for a full 24 hours, by which time the bass cones had loosened up considerably. My initial listening sessions concentrated on this pair's sound quality through the RCA analogue inputs, leaving the wireless, Bluetooth and digital inputs until much later. I noted the top of the case had become slightly warm and although there is a fan fitted to the rear

panel I didn't hear it operating, that is if it activated at all during the listening sessions.

So, connected up to the analogue outputs from my resident CD

player, I began by playing my current reference disc, namely Fink's "Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet" live album. Track one on this album called "Biscuits For Breakfast" contains plenty of ambience cues from the venue it was recorded in and indeed this track probably has the greater wealth of this attribute than the entire album, each track recorded in different venues. The Stream/Surf pairing did a pretty good job of relaying that ambience, although there were not unexpected limitations as how far they could scour the last drop of detail that other systems manage – albeit at greater cost, I might add. Throughout this opening track the drummer gives a pounding rhythmic kick drum that underpins the entire piece and some fine cymbal work with crisp rim shots to the snare drum too, all of which has to sound tonally accurate with spot on timing to be believable and the Stream/Surf pairing gave a good rendition of that. Moving on to the track "Sort Of Revolution", the pace quickens and the audience shows plenty of enthusiasm by clapping along with the bass guitarist's intro, adding whistles and cheers for good measure. Once again I expect realism in this part of the track and lesser systems tend to blur and smear here, but to their credit the Stream/Surf pairing acquitted themselves well. Following the intro the drummer sets up a pounding kick drum beat and he really does drive down onto the floor tom which has to be delivered with crisp power and authority by the speaker and

amplifier under evaluation here. A pleasant surprise as they mustered a goodly percentage of the standards I'm expecting during this track and I then became curious which component out of the two was the better performer.

"Go for broke Dominic" I thought to myself and paired the £499.00 Cabasse amplifier with a pair of

Audiofilia AF-F6 floor-standers costing 6000 Euros no less. Much to my surprise, the Cabasse amplifier drove



them with absolute ease and produced a clean open sound with some decent heft in the bass registers too. Top end too was well extended and crisp, with the Audiofilia speakers having a sensitive ribbon tweeter installed, any deficiencies here would soon have been readily highlighted. Time for the Surf speakers to show what they are made of and in they went into my resident system, mounted on to 60cm stands around 15cm from the rear wall. Given the size of the enclosures and drivers, they managed to produce a big hearty sound with plenty of drive and dynamics, comparable with speakers from a much higher price bracket. However, I would liked to have heard just a tad more resolving power and detail resolution at the very top end of the treble registers as I struggled to hear the venue ambience changes in the Fink live album. OK, I am nit picking here and at their £379.00 price point they performed rather well against their contemporaries in a similar price bracket, so they are worthy contenders for a serious listen in maybe an overly bright sounding system where that slight curtailment in the upper treble could be beneficial.

Fine then with analogue input, so how did the digital evaluation pan out? Cabasse have their own downloadable software suite which I duly installed on my mobile phone so I could connect to the Stream amplifier both internet wirelessly and via Bluetooth. The software perpetually told me I had to download the



# CABASSE STREAM 100 AMP & SURF LOUDSPEAKERS

latest version after it had finished installing and that was despite downloading the current version and in the end I just ignored that message. Apart from that small hiccup, the software worked very well, it was easy to set up and navigate, so for a crusty old reprobate like me it was a small blessing. Of course my perpetual gripe about battery life with tablets and mobile phones still holds true and my own preference would be to link via internet wirelessly from my PC running Windows rather than a mobile device relying on limited battery power with either Apple iOS or Android operating systems, which of course my PC won't run. I cannot be the only person on this planet who wishes to stream wirelessly from either a PC or laptop running Windows surely? My PC recognizes that these devices are registered on the 'net, but no software to connect with them to send music to. There is software that purports to do that available for Windows, but I have yet to manage configuring any of them to work in that role.

Sermon over, I did manage about 90 minutes of music from my mobile phone before the battery expired.

The Stream is equipped with a TOSLINK digital input and my resident CD player has SPDIF output only so apologies for skipping that, nor does it have HDMI or USB connections and that is a hindrance at times. I do have a convertor box thingy but that isn't a great performer so decided that was not a worthwhile move. OK then, a USB cable from my PC to the front panel input on the Stream produced a comparable sound to the analogue input, again a satisfactory result.

## CONCLUSION

While the Stream amplifier isn't the Swiss Army Knife of media players with a plethora of inputs like some of its immediate rivals (notably the Pro-Ject MAIA), it more than makes up for that shortfall in outright sound quality and ease of use. I particularly liked the touch sensitive front panel controls which

means that if the remote control unit stops working or gets lost, at least you have full control of the device's functions regardless.

It would therefore be wise before purchase to ensure that your source output connections match the in-

put connections available with the Stream, as the convertors available on the market leave a lot to be desired.

On the subject of sound quality, the Stream managed to drive really well a pair of speakers that were well out of its league and capable of showing up any deficiencies the amplifier may have had and the Stream amplifier acquitted itself really well in this respect. Paired with the Surf speakers they produced a powerful and pleasing sound that I could not really level any criticism at, save a slight rolling off at the extreme top end and I do mean extreme, which shouldn't perturb the average listener. A lack of SPDIF RCA



digital input should be noted here again though.

The Surf loudspeakers also deserve merit as being very good performers in their own right both for their performance to size ratio and price.

## SCORED AS A PAIRING

**Build quality: 8.4/10**

**Sound quality: 8.8/10**

**Value for money: 8.5/10**

**Overall: 8.56/10**

### Pros:

**Ease of setup and good sound quality**

**Front panel touch controls are a welcome feature**

### Cons:

**No SPDIF digital input.**

**Dominic Marsh**

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# MUNROSONIC EGG100 ACTIVE MONITORS



**The MunroSonic EGG150 is a £2000 active monitoring system with a twist. Dan Worth takes a listen to this egg shaped speaker and tells us if it's all it's cracked up to be.**

Many have chosen to abandon the typical box shaped loud-speaker enclosure for one of a more curved profile, aligning drivers and chassis to eliminate standing waves and cabinet interactions, aiming for as inert an enclosure as possible whilst pushing technical craftsmanship and machining to their limits in order to sculpt a design which intrigues the eye, is domestically acceptable and most importantly sonically superior.

The 'egg' style design has been implemented by several companies over the years and I have heard many of them. However the shape has been mainly used for speakers who's frequency ranges are higher than the typical 'full range' box design, leaving bass duties to a matching subwoofer.

MunroSonic a British company have created an active speaker design which provides a frequency response from an egg shaped speaker that is so life like I wanted to get a giant spoon and break the shell.

I believed, when I was aware of the potential for the review that as the EGG150s were active and deemed as a 'monitoring' speaker that they would naturally have two amps and crossovers installed into the perfectly scaled up egg enclosures and as people know I prefer to go into a review blind without any preconceived ideas or website information of any product, so I was indeed surprised to open a box which revealed unexpected contents.

When I unpacked them I was very intrigued to see the speakers accompanied by a control amplifier. Not a control amplifier as you would imagine for preamp



# MUNROSONIC EGG100 ACTIVE MONITORS

duties, but rather a full integrated type.

The amplifier design incorporates all the electronics required to power the EGG150s with a crossover up-front adjusted by small screw trim pots for high and low frequencies and a midband equalisation to emulate either hifi or monitoring type frequencies. Four individual amplifiers rated at 50wpc with 100w of headroom powered by a large toroidal transformer power the passive eggs.

The amplifiers main input is via balanced XLR and an AUX RCA input allows for other front end devices such as CD players and streamers to be connected. Each of the two inputs have their own volume control. Speaker outputs are via speakon sockets and a 3m pair of cables are supplied. To top things off MunroSonic have graciously installed a Class A headphone amplifier.

**It's not really thought of that often for pro audio gear and hifi to merge into each other's environments.**

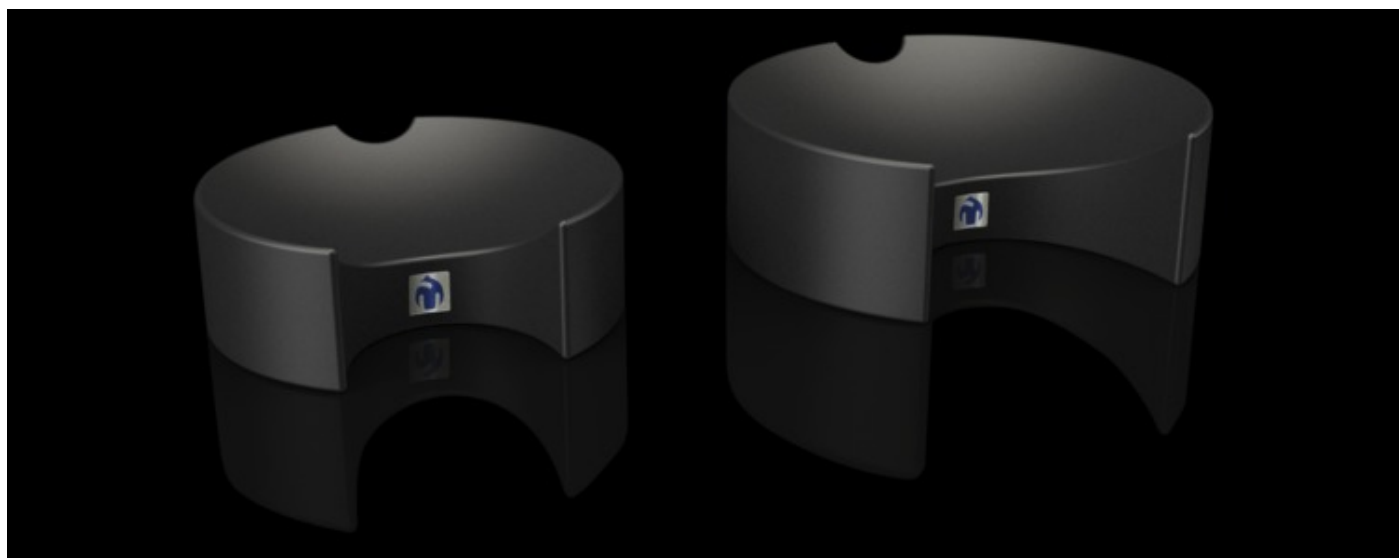
It's not really thought of that often for pro audio gear and hifi to merge into each other's environments. Manufacturers such as ATC can and do align their ranges with each type. For me, a long term user of active speakers, although I have greatly enjoyed many, I have also had some absolute horrors. I like a warmer and bouncier type sound from a typical monitoring speaker such as the Kevlar drivers of a KRK, but

I also like the definition and reveal of say a Focal or ATC for instance. To be able to obtain the best of a monitoring speaker's attributes and convert it into an everyday listener is no mean feat, so I approach this review with an open mind and intrigue.

The enclosures or monocoques of the EGG150s are pretty solid to a knuckle wrap, although I do not like their plasticky finish. It strikes me every time I look at them that they really are a scaled replica of an ac-



# MUNROSONIC EGG100 ACTIVE MONITORS



tual egg! There have been very similar designs but these are just uncanny. In order to seat the EGGs on any surface and to keep their downward firing port free and open the units come with rubber 'Nests' which allow the user to move the speakers up, down, left and right for perfect placement and a small LED above each tweeter (which can be switched off) allows the listener to align the sweet spot easily.

Setup in my listening space was on a pair of speaker stands in my main listening area with the EGG150s seated in their nests, ever so slightly angled back, about 6 feet apart, the smallest amount of toe in and my listening position placed at around 7'-8' away.

## THE SOUND

On switch on for the first time I could hear buzzing coming through both drivers which I wasn't prepared for and I backtracked through the whole system before determining that this was 100% down to the review equipment. It was barely audible from my listening position but as soon as I moved closer to the speakers I could clearly hear it.

**The EGG150s provide a solid integration into the listening space and combine a truthfulness that converts intricate detail retrieval into a good all round listening experience.**

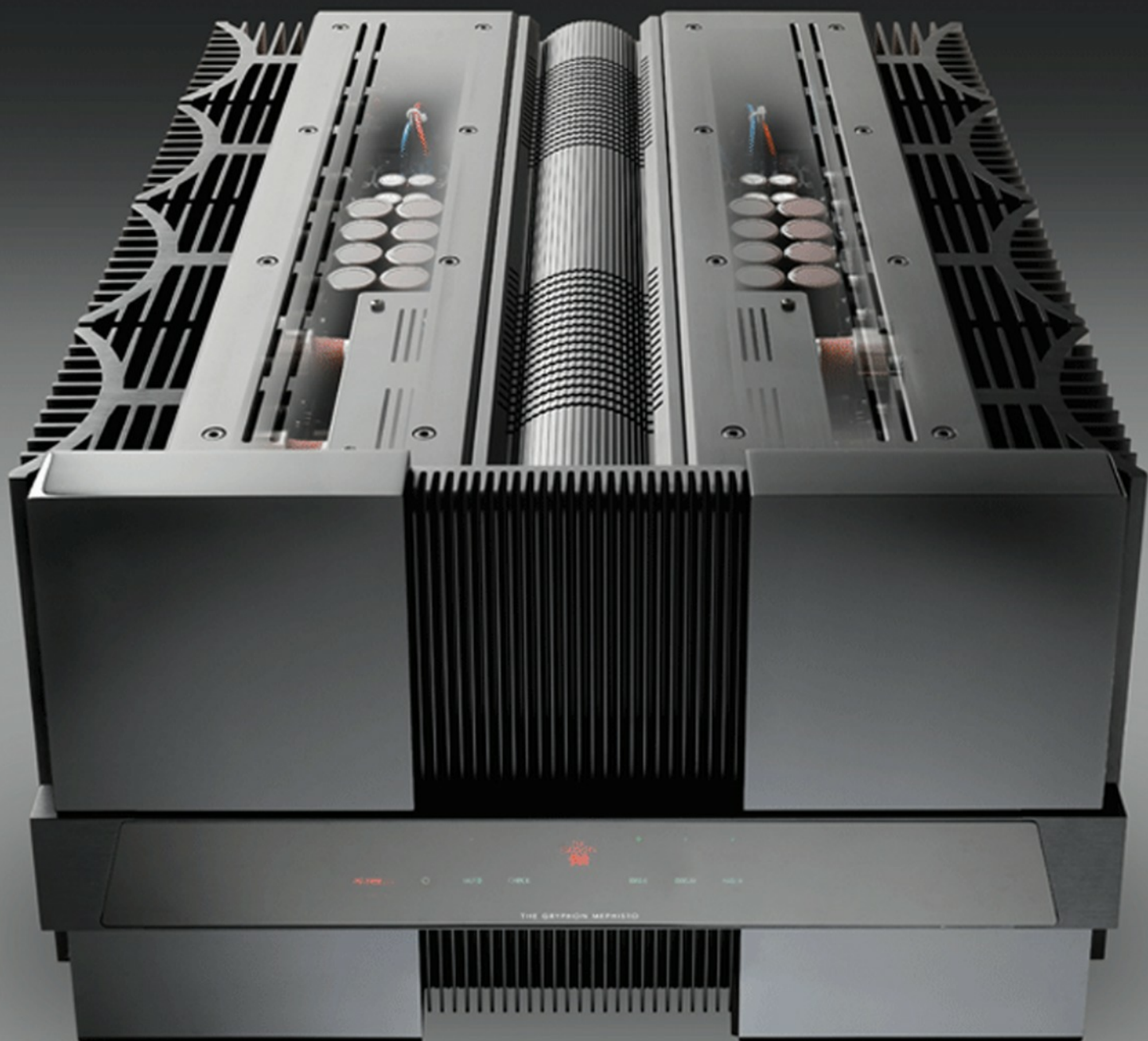
Playing music even at low levels masked the irritant and during the first few tracks played I knew I had to tailor the crossovers to open up the sound as it was very coloured out of the box with the trim pots set to full. It didn't really make for a great first impression with me I'm afraid.

After trimming for my room and my tastes was accomplished, further listening tests were really beginning to prove that after some burn in time these speakers will have fantastic potential, with a warmth that slightly underlined a good transparent and neutral sound.

I often begin to listen to a speaker with a range of pop music, there's usually so much going on in this type of music that any pros and cons quickly emerge, which I can then investigate further. On this occasion I found the top end to be simply stunning, a real nice handful of refinement and re-

vealing detail and with some intent listening I found the 'Hifi' setting on the midrange pot to offer a far more open sound which gave more insight and emotion, where as going back a notch to 'Reference' and back again to 'NS10' made the sound progressively

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# MUNROSONIC EGG100 ACTIVE MONITORS

more compressed or closed in.

I listened to Loreena McKennitt's 'Mask and the Mirror' album and my findings were backed up when Loreena's exquisite vocal went from pure and openly projected to a more monochrome sense to its display.

Her vocal was more singled out on the pro settings and would be great for analysis, but for playback in a hifi sense, which is really the main concern here for review, the 'Hifi' settings was far superior.

Damien Rice's 'Older Chests' allowed me to tune in to the upper bass particularly and also discern the transducers extension. The colouration I mentioned earlier was still apparent and although never overwhelming I would say that upper bass notes had a small hump which sometimes clouded notes had a link to lower mids which gave a richness especially to male vocalists such as Rice. Bass extension was light and very rolled off which I believe, especially in my room (regardless of the low frequency trim) allowed for this upper bass colouration to have more prominence.

Dance and R&B proved to be a real treat, whatever these speakers do to some music to cause any quarrels in my mind made them addictive in these genres and even with some nastier more forward recordings, a slight adjustment to reference or NS10 levels calmed any in your face hardness and still maintained excellent pace and rhythm, with micro details becoming the true star of the show.

Dynamically the EGG150s can also be a little confusing. Where the top end sores with all the control of a butchers knife the upper bass hump can overshadow the purity of the midrange in some instances, yet in others enhance mediocre recordings. The speakers, for me are screaming out for more clarity in this area, revealing more rather than clouding the sound which is something I thought I'd never say about a pro speaker, most warrant criticism for being way too analytical here.

There's no denying that the EGG150s are a very musical speaker and criticisms although tough are based on my experience with many other active speakers and the ones I currently own which offer qualities I just don't think the Munros possess and for me it's

## Dance and R&B proved to be a real treat...

aligned with the mid/bass driver and the use of the rubber nests, as when a friend held one up in the air the colouration minimised to a very nice level that with the correct stands and supports would transform this speaker from good to great and match its top end beautifully.

### CONCLUSION

The EGG150 active speaker system migrates from the pro audio arena to in home hifi exceptionally well, but I would also like to see the guys at MunroSonic adapt the setup to a completely passive design with passive crossovers and a more premium finish to rival the likes of say the Kef LS50's or even ATC's SCM standmounts with complimentary stands.

The EGG150s provide a solid integration into the listening space and combine a truthfulness that converts intricate detail retrieval into a good all round listening experience.

When talking with our editor Stu about these he remarked 'if you can find pro audio gear that really suits the listening space of the home user, he or she can really obtain fantastic value for money.' I agree, wholeheartedly and the MunroSonic EGG150s are a new breed of setup that can do just this and with a few little tweaks for the 'hifi' user (which is very different from a pro user) I can see these being a winner.

**Price at time of review – £2000**

**Build Quality – 8.0/10**

**Sound Quality – 8.0/10**

**Value for Money – 8.6/10**

**Overall – 8.2/10**

#### Pros:

**Adaptable to environment**

**Detailed hearty sound**

**Great flexibility compared to standard actives**

#### Cons:

**Premium finish desired for the hifi enthusiast**

**Nest stands look bad and add colour to the sound**

**No dedicated floor stands**

**Dan Worth**

# MARTIN LOGAN 15 LOUDSPEAKERS



## MARTIN LOGAN 15 LOUDSPEAKERS

**Martin Logan make the fabulous (and massive) Neolith electrostatic loudspeaker and it is electrostatics they are best known for, but they also produce a wide range of smaller and more accessible loudspeakers and here Dan Worth takes a listen to the company's £899 Motion 15 standmounter.**

**W**hen I was offered a pair of Martin Logan speakers for review I thought great! Now I need to just assemble a team of lumps to help me get them up the stairs to my place. So when I actually realised that I was to receive a pair from their Motion range I knew my back was not going to be in harms way.

The set of Motion 15s I received had already done their rounds and were subsequently ready for the review process, so I can't convey any burning in period.

The pair I had in for review were in a black lacquer and looked very nice indeed (white and deep cherry-red (pictured) lacquered finishes are also available).

A folded 'Motion' ribbon tweeter looks great adorning the upper section of the 15's front baffle and the 5.25" aluminium mid/bass driver with its bullet dust cap/phase plug compliments a very sleek and pleasing on the eye design. Binding posts are of the wing nut variety making connection using spades or bare wire an easy affair allowing for great clamping and grip of the speaker cable ends, 4mm plugs are also accepted.

The Motion 15 are of a diminutive size, just about sitting on my stand's top plate fully. Measuring 173 x 290 x 242mm and weighing in at 5.4kg each their 92db sensitivity is rated at 5ohms but ML state that

they are fully compatible with 4ohm and 8ohm amplifiers rated between 20-200wpc.

The 15s are rear ported for extended bass response which can of course be a hindrance sometimes regarding placement. I didn't feel as if they really suffered from being close to the front wall and moving them about a bit didn't really affect the overall performance much, apart from having them right up against the wall of course which is great as smaller speakers will often be used in all sorts of situations from bookshelves to desks to stands.

### SOUND

The first track up on my playlist was Fink's 'Sort Of Revolution' – Live version. Slightly after the short intro there is a periodic snare drum, which Dom and I argue about sometimes, he states that the drums dynamic intensity and weight should often be greater than he hears it in my system but I disagree and state that as I have solid walls and floors and his are plasterboard and floorboards that he is hearing a greater heft around this frequency which perceivably adds to the weight of the snare.

The Motion 15s are a small standmounts and therefore will not produce all the bass of a larger speaker, although my room by its very nature gives a tighter bass response I found the MLs to produce a nice rich bass note – the amount of bass they produce and the way they extend was admirable. Yes the crispness of the snare wasn't as apparent as say the ATC SCM7s



# MARTIN LOGAN 15 LOUDSPEAKERS



or 11s, but the bass weight, detail and flow of the smoother response was more pleasing to my ears with acoustical music and vocals.

Next up was Loreena McKennitt's 'The Mask and the Mirror' album which has a vocal that allows you to sink into your seat and be washed over with pure emotion. The combination of the wonderfully controlled and smooth Motion ribbon with the aluminium mid/bass driver gave a fully intense and natural vocal which has nice inflections and harmonics with great situational awareness.

I didn't expect Pop or Dance music to be a correct match for these speakers after my initial listening tests and I was right. Bass comes over really quite thin and the speakers become mid to top dominant and this leads to a forwardness. In their favour though, what I was hearing wasn't ever hard, bright or grainy and it did show that the ribbon has some good speed. The Motion 15s excel so well with natural instruments and vocals that anything heavily manufactured or synthesized just fails to impress. You could simply state that these are voiced for 'real music'.

I spent a few hours with the likes of Chris Jones, Fink, Derrin Nuendorf, Sean Lake-man, Damien Rice and Ben Harper. Each male vocalist was greeted with a fleshed out

# MARTIN LOGAN 15 LOUDSPEAKERS



I wouldn't conclude the Martin Logan Motion 15 speakers to be lively and subsequently not a punchy little speaker, but what they do offer is a strong and vibrant well staged sound, with crisp and controlled treble married to a strong stable mid-range – for their price and size they do a remarkable job and have a sheer enthusiasm for instruments and vocals rather than punchier electronica.

They won't ever get caught in a speed trap, but the top-end has great pace and the bottom-end doesn't lag behind or ever seem slow, balancing nicely for a more natural presentation.

lower midrange response that gave the impression that the sound could have been coming from a larger cabinet, although when AB-ing with larger speakers revealed that there was more to be had, it took this process to remind the mind.

So congratulations to Martin Logan for addressing an area of the sound which can be either stark with other smaller footprint standmounts, or over rich in order to compensate for cabinet size.

I was, in my system, happy with soundstage height and front to back staging from the little Logan's allowing for nice amounts of reverb, conveying spatial awareness and, dependant on recording, I heard many details outside of the speakers borders across the front of the soundstage.

The combination of all of these areas gives a wonderfully cohesive and involving presentation, a balance which honestly reflects cabinet size yet reaches into the room and grabs the listener's heart at any volume.

## CONCLUSION

Overall characterisation is slightly smooth, un-offensive and particularly pleasing in a smaller sized room. The design and finish is great and the included grills protect the delicate ribbon from little hands and is also non-offensive or detrimental to the sound.

**Build Quality: 9/10**

**Sound Quality: 8.7/10**

**Value For Money: 8.7/10**

**Overall: 8.8/10**

**Price at time of review – £899**

**For:**

**Great controlled top end**

**Strong rich vocals**

**Very natural balanced presentation**

**Well finished**

**Against:**

**Lack a bit of punch**

**Character doesn't compliment energetic music**

**Dan Worth**



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# ZETA ZERO VENUS PICOLLA LOUDSPEAKERS



**At just under £20 000 the Polish Zeta Zero Venus Picolla are a substantial investment, but they are gorgeously built and something of a work of art Janine Elliot thinks? How do they sound?**

**T**omasz Rogula takes after my heart. He is a sound engineer and owner of a recording studio, unadventurously named TR Studios, apparently very major in Poland. More than that, he is chief designer and founder of Zeta Zero. Zeta Zero is an audio manufacturer from Warsaw, Poland, specialising in multi-ribbon tweeters with large woofer loudspeaker systems, whilst also branching into original powerful monoblocks offer-

ing damping factor of 1600 at 8Ω (that is over 1000W RMS!).

Tomasz' heart and soul is really in the speakers, and having seen them and heard them in a recent UK show I wanted to take them for a ride myself. My own reference system includes a Townshend ribbon supertweeter and the Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generator, so I wanted to test for myself an all in one offering using similar technology of carbon (though

# ZETA ZERO VENUS PICCOLA LOUDSPEAKERS

smaller at 12") woofer, and this time no less than three ribbons.

The Venus Picolla comes in a choice of four finishes (Black, Mahogany-Brown, Sahara Sand and Transparent) with other colours on request, all artistically designed curves of hundreds of beautiful layers of wood all braced together with hundreds of screws at more than 200 points, forming a design inspired by architecture and sculptures. The shape is also based on musical instruments and with the absence of any parallel points the design effectively diminishes harmful effects of standing waves or resonances.

Lionel Monageng from Superior Hifi (UK Distributor) delivered the beautiful work of art to my living room, making my house look more like it was Tate Modern. Apparently the shape is also based on the female form. Being a Venus, I guess that relates to a woman's beauty, as captured by Paleolithic sculpturers of the past. As long as that is not how the designer sees me; its large bottom, holding the 12" carbon woofer built to Zeta Zero's specification, looks like it seriously needs to go to weight-watchers. Whether or not you like the looks, this certainly is a radical speaker, reminding me of Vivid and other radical enclosures, and perhaps Lawrence Audio Cello or Double Bass.

The Zeta Zero models (presently a range of 4) are all designed not just for aesthetics, but to get the best sound. Quoted at 26 50,000Hz this 3-way design of a single bass, two mid-ribbons and a super tweeter allows short-term peaks up to 1000W, meaning your house, or rather mine, was filled with music with no signs of stress or pain. Indeed, these 65kg speakers can cope with rooms of up to 100sq metres quite well and delivering in excess of 130dB peak SPL, not that I tested this.

All Zeta Zero speaker systems employ ribbons for the high frequencies. Tomasz is passionate about ribbons. Indeed, his latest offering, after 6 years of development, has no less than a 360 degree array of a single ribbon and single magnetic ring, the "Orbital 360" creating omni-directional sound. What makes the Piccola special is the fact that the ribbons can handle such high levels of sound. These are constructed using nano

technologies and the most advanced components which – Tomasz says – are usually only found in military applications. These help to keep down the temperatures.

As well as four terminals allowing biwiring, there are two port holes at the back; one a tuned hole, and the other holding a potentiometer to vary the volume level of the HF above 14dB in a range of +/- 2dB. Also in this port is an RCA socket for a small box housing a 9v battery, supplied with the speaker that activates the computer on-board the Piccola to view the history of overloads on all speaker drivers. The display panel for this is located in the Super tweeter and flashes one of three colours; amber, green or red. Amber means you are still within recommended wattage levels for this model. Being fed with more





# ZETA ZERO VENUS PICCOLA LOUDSPEAKERS

than 800Watts will turn it red, though I didn't want to try to test this out. Usually this computer is activated by the signal fed to the speaker when playing music too loud and works as defence mechanism to protect and record overloads. As Lionel told me; "The speaker owner can happily go on holiday and be able to check if the kids had a party while they were away. A 'Big Brother' in the Speakers!" (or rather, big sister, going by my earlier comments). Bear in mind the top frequencies only use 1% of the power of the lower frequencies, the highest ribbon would probably only be fed 1 – 5Watts from my own listening tests, so there was no chance of overloading it. The mid ribbons, well perhaps 10 Watts max. I do have neighbours...

This was an interesting review. At £19,990 these are not cheap. They sit alongside B&W, Focal, Kef, Sonus faber, Wilson Audio, Wilson Benesch, Vivid and many other makes of top-notch loudspeakers, so this is a serious review. For just short of twenty thousand pounds this is a lot of money for speakers, but the design and build is certainly worth every penny. There is no MDF or plywood in this model. It was beautifully carved and glossed by a carpenter and is therefore necessary to be part of the cost of owning the artwork, taking considerable time to build each pair.

## SOUND

Once set up and toed into my sitting position and around a metre from walls and anything else, I began my listening. The sound was very large, covering the soundstage with mighty detail and with smoothness only ribbons can do. Vocals were precise and inviting and all sounds carried a good depth in front and behind, and a reasonable width. Some people see in colours and for me the colour was a healthy green;



not red or yellow brightness or a dull or boring blue or grey. This was exact, just as it should sound. The woofer is so close to the ribbons there wasn't even a separation of sources or frequencies like some well-known and very expensive speakers that I could name.

Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Robin Ticciati, Linn 24/192) was exact and not showing any stress when the music gets excited, and this and anything else I played had sounds



# ZETA ZERO VENUS PICCOLA LOUDSPEAKERS

that were fast and with an ease of driving that only ribbons can do well.

Passing to David Gilmour's latest offering, 'Rattle that Lock', showed the 12" woofer and ribbons at their very best. I don't normally like large woofers, preferring a smaller bass or two or more in parallel, but these Carbon fibre bass units are very light, and actually don't move a great amount, so the sound is still quite quick. From the bird atmosphere at the start of the first track "5 am", to the bass pizzicatos under the string line followed by the electric guitar, to the broken chords on the acoustic guitar that followed, everything was there, and so very clear.

Even with all the power I needed to feed this Venus I could still have played this at 5am without annoying the neighbours, it was so beautiful. Indeed, a test of a really good set of speakers is your ability to talk over loud sections and still be heard. "Rattle that Lock" is very bright and with complicated harmonies, but it was still so clear. Whatever I played gave an authoritative and clear rendition from the very lows to the highs. I only at times found the music lacked the stereo spread I was hoping for that I get from my Wilson Benesch/Townshend Supertweeters, but it was only a small criticism. Everything else was

there. And that's just it; it was all there, very clear, just like I would expect in a recording studio, or even Tomasz's own studio for that matter. Gilmour "The Boat Lies Waiting" sounded too clinical for me. Perhaps I was missing something that wasn't there. It was just too easy for me. This album is very top heavy and I could feel it being slightly emphasised by the ribbons; it wasn't adding anything, just showing the album as it was. I was sitting in a Rolls Royce with beautiful wood veneer, and I really wanted a Ferrari for my bucks. I wanted more excitement.

Switching to the Zeta Zero 1175 poweramps the sound was a different experience, actually working better than the Krell Class A amplifier I normally use to heat up my house. Although at first thought these are Class D, they are claimed as "operating on the principle of continuous (non-digitised) modulation of signal in a purely analogue manner". Whatever magic is inside the box these amps are very efficient with my electricity supply, which is always a good thing, and with so much oomph available to pump up the Piccola they form a good partnership, though the sound from the amps didn't work so well when I connected them to my Wilson Benesch. These monoblocks are really good looking and have connections



# ZETA ZERO VENUS PICCOLA LOUDSPEAKERS

for single-ended RCA or balanced XLR, with sockets hidden under a flap so you only need to open the one you need, just in case your partner is keen on tidiness.

## CONCLUSION

This is a really good offering, particularly if you place importance in the looks of your hifi. You would pay thousands for a work of art such as this, and on top of this it is a pair of loudspeakers. They work well in large or small rooms alike, though if a small room you might not have room for the settee. The sound should be the very best bearing in mind great bass and ribbon tweeters, and whilst it is excellent, it didn't warrant a 9 from me (I rarely give a nine). There is indeed brilliant harmony between the drivers, particularly bass and mid. But, £19,990 is a large amount of cash to spend, so I would listen to these and a few alternatives before you spend your hard earned cash.

### Pros:

**Looks and build to the very highest level**

**Detailed sound**

**Excellent frequency range, particularly tops**

**Ribbons!**

**Work in small and big rooms**

**Cons:**

**Price**

**Can expose errors in the recording**

**Not everyone will like the looks**

**Sound Quality: 8.5/10**

**Value for Money: 8.4/10**

**Build Quality: 9.0/10 (Not everyone will like the looks)**

**Overall: 8.63/10**

**Janine Elliot**

## Designer's Notes

The beginning of Zeta Zero was over 12 years ago but I have been building loudspeakers for over 40 years now. The roots of the design came from pressure from my friends and family to build for them

very special and rather unique in sound quality. My wife was a very sensitive audiophile but also business a woman in Citi Corporation which meant she was very tough in her demands and so she was very demanding for the overall quality of the speakers, but also regarding the ART shape design.

One day she said to me: *"Thomas, I want for my living room something that is the best not only in a quality, but also very very beautiful in its styling. I will never allow a ..."* wooden rectangular coffin in my house". This order drove me to join my ribbon drivers with unusual shapes. Fortunately for me I found shapes that are different to traditional, rectangular boxes are much better in sound quality.

For thousands of years humankind has known very well that non-rectangular shapes are good for music and sound reproduction – look at nearly all instruments and nearly all sources of sound including percussions, pianos, guitars, violins, cellos etc. We do not need a university degree to understand that gently shaped loudspeakers will be better than traditional, rectangular shaped speakers.

Unfortunately contrary to real instruments most loudspeakers are the opposite of acoustic instruments in the respect of the shape. Most loudspeaker designers are probably simply ...very very lazy and they prefer to build "simple coffins" because they are very easy and much cheaper to build than gently shaped or with streamlined bodies as with violins etc...

Of course some may say 'but a trumpet or a horn is very directional so what?' Ok... but don't you know that all professional musicians NEVER direct their horn at you directly during the performance?? They always try to move the horn around higher or lower "above your head and into the sky" when they play, but **never** directly at you as a listener. So they try to create multi directional emission of energy depending on played notes.

In 90% of world class recording studios you will also not find parallel walls or **any** parallel windows! Any simple shape or parallel walls or planes are strictly forbidden in any good acoustic designs. Unfortunately in most of loudspeakers this simple rule is forgotten, missed and omitted.


So streamlined Zeta Zero shapes were developed and patented.

**Mr Tomasz Rogula**

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## DiDiT DAC 212 DIGITAL TO ANALOGUE CONVERTER

**Dan Worth takes the £3000, Dutch designed DiDiT 212 Digital to Analogue Converter for a ride and rather enjoys it.**



**R**ients Steenbeek MD at DiDiT Technologies has been a music enthusiast since a young boy. Whilst his father and brother both played the piano, Rients learned and played the violin. At the age of 14 Rients was allowed by his parents to dismantle the families audio and television equipment in order to build his on system. Rients found that although the turntable and speakers were good he, even at the age of 14, realised that the

inbuilt receiver was not up to scratch, which spurred him on to build his very first amplifier from a kit. Later, after many years of sourcing high quality electronics he became a supplier for others and this is how he met his other very knowledgeable team members.

Former Industrial Design Student Roy van der Hulst was a portable music enthusiast from a young age, moving through the ranks of cassette Walkmans, to personal CD players to mini-discmans as well as de-

# DiDiT DAC 212 DIGITAL TO ANALOGUE CONVERTER

veloping a fetish for high quality headphones. Soon Roy was on the 'hifi merry-go-round' buying Asian imported electronics from Rients and although they both appreciated the sound of the equipment, they believed the styling wasn't for the European market.

So the combination of his industrial experience and Rients' contacts moved the pair on to create their own company with the ethos of designing equipment from the ground up, focusing on style without sonic compromise.

Team member Patrick Schoon was born the son of a Phillips technician and has an extremely strong background in building, repairing and maintenance of musical instruments as well as electronics. Working in the 80's primarily in the recording, broadcast and theatre industry Patrick has a very broad spectrum for sound and has accustomed himself with the installation and creation of music across the many industries making him invaluable to the team.

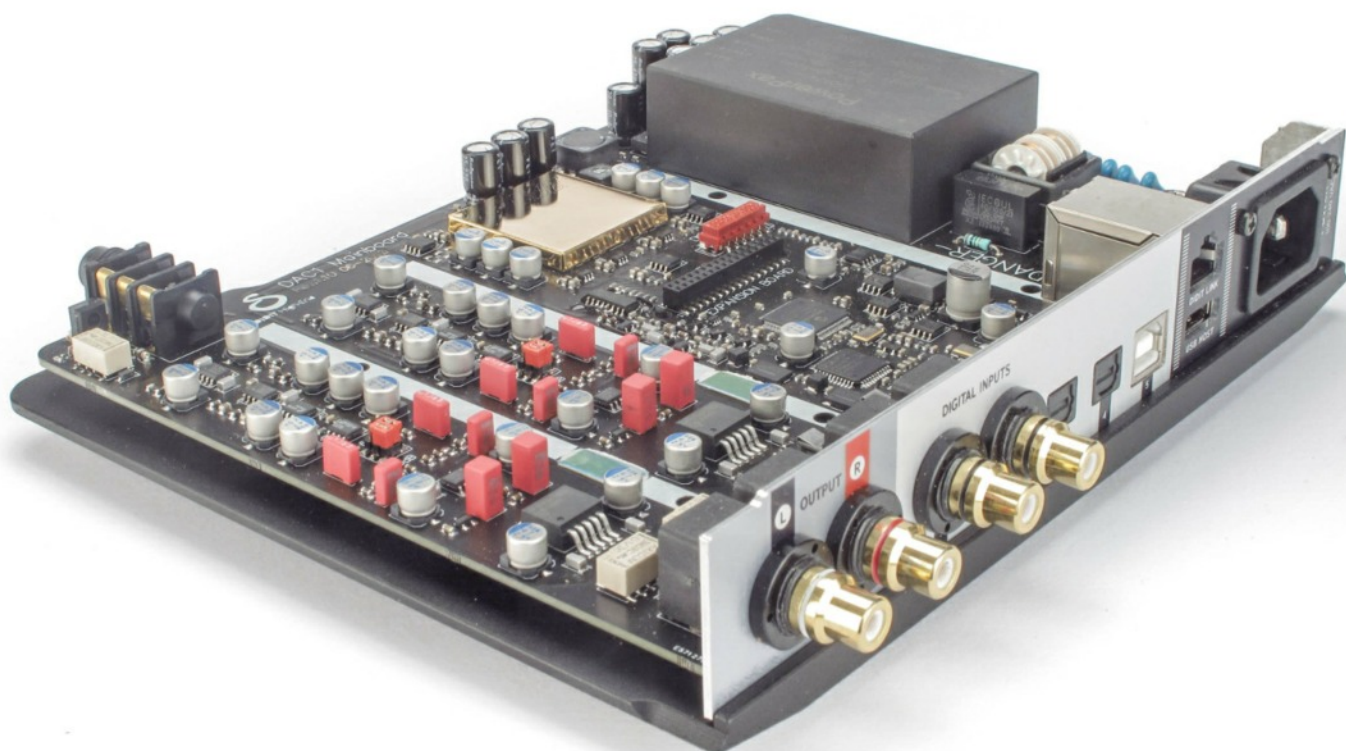
Last but certainly not least Sebastiaan de Vries believes he was 'simply born for music' playing piano

and bass from a young age. Sebastiaan attended the Dutch Conservatory for Music learning about audio design which he put to good use creating and also modifying electronics, he feels his background as a musician has allowed him to do very well, fine tuning the sound for its most natural presentation.

Both Patrick and Sebastiaan have been doing OEM work for other companies whilst still furthering the DiDiT brands portfolio.

I'm happy to always talk and convey to readers when I meet an individual or company so deeply invested in the creation of music, through instruments or electronics and who can really marry the two together. In my experience I find that some of the very best equipment on today's market comes from folk who are so deeply rooted as musicians and have had such a varied music based life, this surely must translate to a product of some sophistication!

It's all too often that someone has an electronics degree and then they build an amplifier or other piece of Hifi paraphernalia that falls short of the mark – as





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# DiDiT DAC 212 DIGITAL TO ANALOGUE CONVERTER



they don't understand the true essence and power that well presented tones can do for the emotions of the brain. There's got to be that passion for the music first and foremost.

A fairly long introduction – the guys at DiDiT boast some strong credentials, so let's see if the 212 flatters them.

## PACKAGING

The packaging for the DAC212 looks pretty damn good. Made from a thick soft shock absorbent cork which has etched logos and has been machined out or moulded to accept the DAC and finished externally with rounded corners, it really is a nice touch before even exposing the unit itself. It gives you that feeling that these guys really make an effort in presenting everything to you with a degree of sophistication.

## BUILD AND DESIGN

There are many 'blinged up' products at the moment on the market which offer style over substance. As we expand the size of our homes, life products do seem to be getting smaller by the day due to advances in technology. Big doesn't mean better, but I can

assure you neither does smaller, it's all down to the creative force behind the product.

Coming in at 8 inches squared and a mere 2 inches high the DiDiT DAC can certainly be classed as a piece of lifestyle equipment. Machined from aluminium billet the casework is absolutely flawless with great attention to detail going into its minimalistic design, which for me falls into the hifi jewellery category... the workmanship reminds me of Jeff Roland or Nagra.

The base of the unit has three small aluminium ringed sorbothane feet. The feet's mass has been very carefully calculated after the finished design was weighed in order to find the correct sorbothane to mass ratio – too little and the product will ring like a struck crystal glass, too much and the midrange will just be sucked out and bass response becomes sloppy in my experience, so getting this aspect correct, although not a hard task, is just another small detail which the guys at DiDiT haven't overlooked.

## CONNECTIONS

This version of the DAC has a single ended RCA output (balanced to follow) with two coaxial RCA inputs, optical and USB. The unit can decode signal

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up to 32bit and 384khz. Accompanied with the DAC is the wand like DiDiT remote offering full control over the volume, source, power, muting and menu features and is also exceptionally well machined/designed. I've got to point you to the dot matrix display coming through the casework, it looks great and can if desired be turned down or off via the menu.

## POWER SUPPLY

The 212 uses an internal switch-mode power supply – eek! I hear you say. Now normally your eeks would be very well justified as switch-modes inject a terrible amount of noise into electronics and back into the shared mains too and generally they're not compliant with balanced mains supplies which I use myself.

If you speak to any knowledgeable audio engineer they will testify to the fact that a well designed and implemented switch-mode supply can in fact offer benefits to a product, I am no engineer but I have a set of ears. What I have found in the past is that the overall pace of a unit's sonic signature is known to be increased and at the same time its bass performance tighter and more articulated. Plugging the DiDiT into my balanced mains supply caused no issues at all, unlike some of the standard cheap varieties which have played havoc in my rig when tested previously.

## THE SOUND

The first thing noticeable with a DiDiT 212 DAC in my system was how the sound became more focused over the current Astin Trew Concorde. There was a crisper, tighter and more articulated presentation.

During Nils Lofgren's 'Keith Don't Go' notes are completely embellished with vigour and prominence, reaching dynamic purity as the weight of a string climbs into its polished high pitch. Decays had a nice "floatiness" as they wandered through the darkness of background silence that aided the completeness of the plucked string.

Combining three dimensionality with true rhythmic musicality Lofgren's vocal begins again after his solo and there is no loss of definition to the instrument with it retaining its tonal qualities in full.

Rhythm and pace sit equally with instrument timbre and coherence in the 212's world. The DAC never sounds exasperatingly fast, but the quickness in which it deals with leading edges is undoubtedly accurate and controlled. Beat driven music has an in-

stant toe tapping appeal and smile factor which is just so addictive.

Play any good acoustic music which has strong female vocals and the 212 is pretty stunning. Too many people in my experience sacrifice vocal density for vocal clarity. It's so easy to find a piece of equipment or system that does clarity of a vocal, which generally makes the midrange over-forward and the upper mids (especially in female vocals) too hard and etched. This leaves the density of tone thin, lacking body and cohesiveness.

The DiDiT combines projected strong and vibrant vocals with great tone and dynamic expression. Upper bass notes are controlled and the texture of the body of a lower octave is detail rich and natural in tone, expressing real timbre from start to finish, culminating in fantastic liquidity.

I really can't state that the DAC is coloured in any way. I would like to say that it's neutral and coherent, but there's more to it than that. The vibrancy of details, control of tones and the rhythmic beating heart of the 212 puts it smack bang on my 'great all rounder' list of components due to its fine balance.

Yes I've heard other DACs do vocals better, the Lampizator Big 7 does vocals like no other DAC I've ever heard, a magnificent mix of holographic and organic frequencies, but on the flip side I never found it truly rhythmical. The Astin Trew Concorde, which missed out by a fair bit when reproducing the purity of instrument tone and timbre but was a far better fit with a larger range of equipment and genres, for reviewing this was really a must. Being unselfish and gearing a system to remain reflective of a great range of musical styles and other product signatures is crucial.

The DiDiT 212 (costing less than both the above) for me sits somewhere in between the two, but on reflection of this comment I feel it does more than each respectively. The 212 hammers home how strong product design matched with carefully selected components doesn't need to cost the earth in order to supply the end-user with a fantastic high-end product.

Imagine a large block of ice being sculptured by the sculptor. During the process it's sawn to remove large unwanted sections, then chiselled and hammered into shape, but the edges are rough still and the piece of ice still remains opaque. Some amateurs may stop here – relating the sculptured form to the

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subject matter, although a true artist will get a blow torch and hot water to finish the piece to give its transparency, clarity and sparkle, at the same time smoothing and polishing its surfaces. This is my DiDiT 212 analogy.

We exchange the word smooth for controlled in the analogy, for me a smooth sounding piece of equipment rolls off frequencies, damps tones and dynamics and has a relationship with the description 'warm'. The 212 is far from this, its insight and control shows complete clarity right through its image and like the ice sculpture is truly liquid.

Bass performance, whether playing an instrument or synthesized beats, is as I said rhythmic, but the insight, especially into upper bass notes, is fantastic. Many many times I comment on products lacking body in the upper bass, making way for a more detailed interpretation which often is too stark and almost makes the music sound miserable and lifeless. I was listening to some Fleetwood Mac at the time and really was drawn into this area of the sound. What I found was there are the smallest areas of separation between the lower bass and upper bass which seemed to alleviate smear, gave better timing and the lack of crosstalk allowed the detail rich upper bass to really have an area of its own that never became loose of the entirety of the sound and eradicated that blend of tones that can also muddy things a little down below. Intense passages at loud levels give dynamic drama that is very exhilarating.

A kick drum kicks with drive and prominence, fleshed out and proud of the drum basket and lower bass notes emanate at volumes which really roll deep into the room without any loss of their leading edges, so make sure you have a strong amplifier for your loudspeakers to compliment the drive.

A high end piece of equipment which is designed to really extract a lot of information from a piece of music will always have it suffering when playing less than good recordings and the 212 is no different. The question is how badly will the sound diminish, is

**The DiDiT 212 from Rients and the team in the Netherlands is a stunning piece of engineering, a real classy looking product with an equally classy sound – especially for the money**

it liveable with and how often do we need to be playing less than adequate recordings?

For me, I play less than great recordings a lot! When I'm not reviewing or having a listening session and as I don't watch a lot of TV I explore Spotify frequently and when friends come over at the weekend it's easy to hand them the iPad (as a remote) and allow them to choose whatever they wish to listen too. Of course I'm going to report a loss of quality and resolution, but what I ad-

mire about the 212 is its musical appeal and character. This remains present and although there are definite shortcomings, the overall experience is still massively enjoyable and that's got to be key!

## USING THE DIGITAL PREAMPLIFIER

Next up was using the 212 as a DAC/pre connected to some Cairn MEA monoblocks...Wow! I never believed that I would be so impressed with it as a digital preamp. Usually I will use a Rowland pre into the Cairns and they get used very often here. The MEA's have an absolutely huge soundstage, wall to wall and floor to ceiling. With the JR pre the sound is bouncy and just so energetically enthralling, they really are a hidden jewel.

With the 212 doing the forefront duties I found a new sense of inspiration for the sound. Bass notes were tighter and deeper, midrange had a further increase of clarity over the JR pre (which adds some warmth to the sound) and due to the well balanced nature of the Cairns the increase in clarity and perceived top end resolution pushed them on sonically, with better synergy, authority and most noticeably pace and rhythm.

## CONCLUSIONS

The DiDiT 212 from Rients and the team in the Netherlands is a stunning piece of engineering, a real classy looking product with an equally classy sound – especially for the money.

For me the vocals are standout with this DAC, if you are a valve fan vocally, but go potty at the pitfalls



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such as the looser bass and the loss of that bottom most octave and want to try something in the solid state arena again, then I'd suggest you have a 'money back' listen.

Apart from the vocals and bass pace nothing else really stands out, or is that the wrong way of phrasing this? What I mean is the tonal balance, coherence and down right musicality of this unit allows you to be truly emerged in the music, rather than ever being drawn to certain areas. It's always easy to listen to electronics, but it's not often we just relax into a truly musical presentation and leave everything else outside the door.

Note: I really enjoyed this one. So much that I've bought two, this one and the soon to be released balanced XLR version which will also support HDMI over I2s which is my primary digital connection.

Update: as well as my purchase a good friend of mine Andy telephoned me for another DAC recommendation, he currently uses a VAD DAC (same as our editor Stuart). I of course recommended the DiDiT for his Graaf/Audionote/Kondo system and he absolutely fell in love with it through his mega-bucks horns.

**Sound Quality – 8.9/10**

**Build Quality – 9/10**

**Value For Money – 9/10**

**Overall – 8.96/10**

Price at time of review: €3000

For:

Great dynamics

Even handed sound with clarity and weight to boot

Exceptional build quality

Dynamic and harmonic

Against:

Won't accommodate round barrel type IEC plugs, use a Furutech FI-15 when seeking a good quality thinner IEC.

**Dan Worth**

## Designer's Notes

The DAC212 is designed around multilayer circuit boards.

With multilayer board designs, we can assign one layer to an unbroken ground plane, which will give a very low inductance design with reduced crosstalk.

All power supply layers are designed in differential pairs. High and low current traces are paired and separated from each other. Designing is performed with advanced CAD/CAM computer simulation methods. This way of designing drastically reduces distortion below the 0.001% barrier.

### Virtual Grounding, Balanced Interfacing

Good grounding is an essential point in any audio design. When multiple circuits or stages get combined, they often use a common ground return path. This same ground gets somewhere connected to the chassis, and the chassis in turn to earth. In such situations, it is hard to control the current loops. More important, interferences from circuit to circuit and from the outside world get induced in the common ground lines. This raises distortion and noise. In the DAC212 the line amplifier stages float with no reference to ground. To accomplish this, the internal interfacing from the DAC to the line amplifier stages is truly balanced internally. This makes the circuits more immune for ground-loops and interference, and it increases headroom.

To take the independency from common ground even further, the line amplifier stages are configured in an "equal impedance differential setup", where the output of a DC servo forms a ground point and provides a zero volt reference instead of the common stages are driven Direct Coupled.

The input circuitry literally floats above ground. No ground noise can be induced anymore anywhere in the line amplifier stage. This way, the line amplifiers ensure a high common mode rejection from hum, noise, and other distortions. Internally differential balanced lines are always paired as differential pairs, and low pass filter stage are configured differential with equal impedance arms for positive and negative.

We are extremely focused on reducing noise levels in our circuits. As we see this as the key to obtain more resolution. Each channel, every stage and system clock has its own very low noise power supply regulator, thereby isolating the sensitive circuits. The DAC212 uses no less than 12 independent very low noise local power supply regulators.

This all results in a THD of 0,00035%, a S/N ratio of 122dB (A weighted) and a linearity measurement which is one straight-line down to -135 dB.

All without sacrificing musicality.

**RientsSteenbeek**



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**LAB 12 GORDIAN POWER CONDITIONER/DISTRIBUTOR**

**The gordian from Lab 12 is hand built in Greece and is a multifunction power distributor/conditioner with a host of functions to measure the quality of your power supply. It costs 1398€ and Stuart Smith bought a special Hifi Pig edition for this review.**

**Hifi Pig****RECOMMENDED**

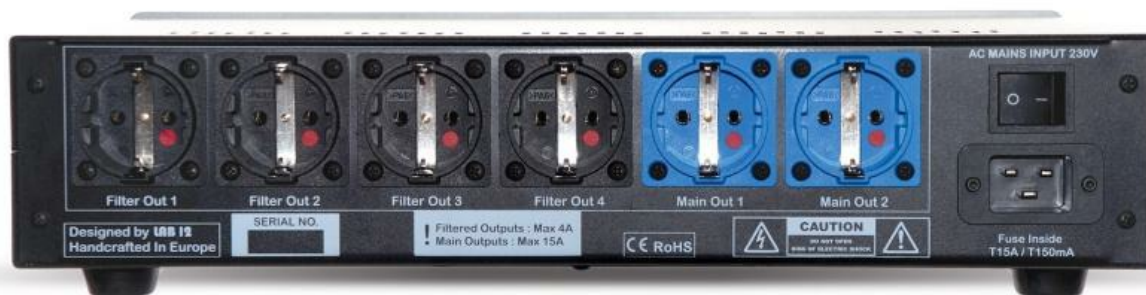
I first met the guys from Greek company Lab 12 a couple of years ago at the Munich High-End show and have been following their progress and products with interest since then. They make a valve integrated amp, a couple of tube power amps, a DAC, a preamplifier, a headphone amplifier, a passive attenuator and the subject to this review, the gordian “multifunction power distributor/conditioner”.

gordian is basically speaking, and this will of no surprise, a product that will supposedly clean up the juice getting to your rig as well as offering distribution of the power to several pieces of kit. But it’s a little bit cleverer than that and that’s why I ordered one at last year’s Munich show...in Hifi Pig pink no less. The Designer’s Notes after this review will tell you more about the techy bits and pieces, but basi-

cally what you have here is a unit that is designed to clean up your mains supply without affecting the dynamics of the system. It also cleverly analyses your power supply and gives “live” readings via the front mounted OLED display – this is great fun. It measures frequency (accurate to 0.0005%), THD (accurate to 0.005%), RMS Voltage/Current, Power Consumption, Power Factor, FFT (frequency analysis) and DC Voltage and you can play with the amount of filtering the unit is applying too...or you can let gordian get on with it all on its own. gordian will also let you know if your ground/earth and polarity are in order.

On the front panel you have two large knobs. The one on the left navigates you around the various parameters you can play with, whilst the knob on the right controls the display itself. Both are chunky and

# LAB 12 GORDIAN POWER CONDITIONER/DISTRIBUTOR



responsive and feel purposeful and solid. Round the back you have four filtered outputs and two “mains” out sockets that are also filtered but intended for kit that is more power hungry. The sockets are industrial looking and, as you’d expect, very well made with the feeling that the unit was built to industrial standards...this is a good thing for a product like this I reckon. At the moment gordian is available with European and US sockets with a UK version planned in the very near future. At this point I ought to mention that gordian is CE and RoHS certified/stamped

which again is important for this kind of unit. gordian comes with a well made 20A KNACK power cord measuring 1.5M. Overall it is a sturdy and well made unit that feels carefully put together by Lab 12.

## SOUND

I had a play with the various filters and messed with the degree of filtering gordian applied, but to be honest I found that the best results were to be had with the unit in automatic mode where it continually analyses your electrics and kit and filters accordingly. Again, read the Designer’s Notes after this review as I’m no scientist and interested only in the end result and the music that comes out the speakers.

**Well it does what it says really, with there being an immediate sense that unwanted noise in the system is lowered, which in turn allows you to hear more of what is going on in the music.**

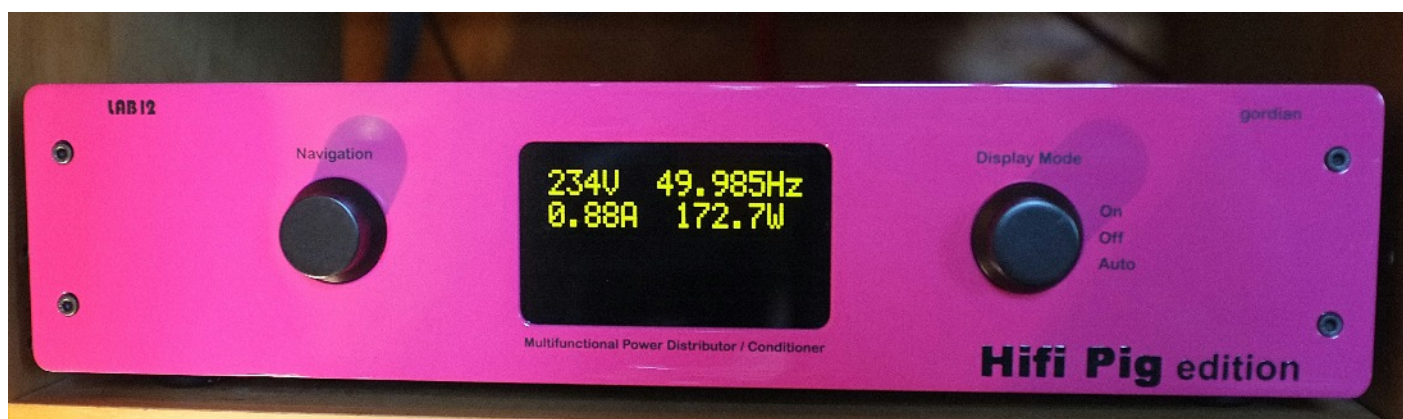
I had amps plugged into the high output sockets and DAC, CD, phono-stage and (when using an active pre) preamplifier in the remaining sockets.

We live in a very old house and the electrics are a bit wayward, we also live at the end of the line with farm buildings before us and the “quality” of the juice coming into the house has always been a bit of a concern at the back of my mind...and this is what led me to buy gordian from the off. And so what does gordian do? Well it does what it says really, with there being an immediate

sense that unwanted noise in the system is lowered, which in turn allows you to hear more of what is going on in the music.

In quieter sections of music there is a feeling that you are able to hear more of the micro detail present in a recording. It’s difficult to describe but there’s also a sense of there being more spatial information available... this is most evident on acoustic tracks like my copy of Concerto De Aranjuez, with guitar feeling a touch more lifelike and “there” in the hall... like I say it’s hard to describe, but it is certainly a “better” effect/sound than with the unit out of the circuit.

# LAB 12 GORDIAN POWER CONDITIONER/DISTRIBUTOR



**Yes you can play with the settings which I'm sure many will want to do, but whack it on autopilot and let it do its thing and you'll be well happy.**

One of the main criticisms of units that claim to “condition” the power being supplied to your system is that dynamics are affected, but I can categorically state that this is just not the case with gordian. The system still feels as fast and lithe as it always has and nothing in the frequency spectrum feels constrained or limited.

## CONCLUSION

There's not really a lot to say about the unit in all honesty other than this reduction in the overall “noise” on the line and the sense of you being able to hear more detail and more of what is going on in the track with a “cleaner” sound overall. I could warble on about a whole host of tracks that I listened to but the effect of gordian in the system remained constantly positive and consistent and so I see little point in doing this.

I've had the unit in the system for around three months now and in the first month I occasionally removed it for a few days to see what happened and found I consistently missed it being there. Basically gordian is a fit and forget bit of kit. Yes you can play with the settings which I'm sure many will want to do, but whack it on autopilot and let it do its thing and you'll be well happy.

I did initially enjoy being able to see the analytics of the power supply (particularly the power draw when turning on bits of kit) and having a play around with that and I'm sure this will be a useful tool for those interested in knowing this kind of thing, but for the last couple of months Gordian has just sat there, quietly getting on with whatever it is that it does and I can heartily recommend it.

**Sound Quality: 8.75/10** (difficult to quantify this really but definitely positive!)

**Value for Money: 8.75/10**

**Build Quality: 9.0/10**

**Overall: 8.83/10**

## Pros:

**Fit and forget**

**A great tool for seeing what is actually going on in your system and with your power supply**



# LAB 12 GORDIAN POWER CONDITIONER/DISTRIBUTOR

**Positive effect on sound**

**Cons:**

**No UK version at the moment**

**Stuart Smith**

## Designer's Notes

gordian combines a powerful industrial grade power analyzer, a smart and adaptive power line conditioner, a power factor corrector and a robust power distributor. It aims at providing valuable information about our main power supply quality and gently improving the quality of our system's power without affecting the positive characteristics of our system (e.g. dynamics) .

The analogue part of its powerful analyzer consists of 8 high precision measuring modules that continuously monitor frequency, AC voltage, DC voltage, high level current, low level current, EMI noise, ground resistance and power connection polarity. The output of these modules is routed to 8 ADC components which gather 256 samples per cycle for each measurement. As a result the main processor of gordian is fed with 2048 quality measurements per cycle of your power line.

Based on these measurements gordian also performs frequency analysis (Fourier transformation) of your system's voltage and current. In other words, it analyses your system voltage and current and finds out the amount of noise that lives in various frequency ranges. Furthermore, it calculates the total harmonic distortion (THD) of your system's voltage and current. THD is the most fundamental indicator of our power quality. It reveals how "pure" and sinusoidal our power signal is. Moreover, it calculates the power consumption and power factor of your system which indicates how effectively your system absorbs power from the electrical network.

All this valuable information (Frequency, AC Voltage, DC Voltage, Current, EMI Noise Level, Ground Quality, Connection Polarity, Frequency analysis, THD, Power Consumption, Power Factor, THD) is accessible through a big and legible OLED display and a simple and convenient menu navigation knob. Especially for the frequency analysis, the owner of gordian may observe a nice plot with a moving cursor for exploring the noise content in the various frequencies of the voltage spectrum. This is a really cool and unique feature that cannot be found in other

power conditioning systems of this category. If you find the OLED display disturbing in the night you can adjust its brightness, turn it off or let Gordian detect when your system is inactive and automatically switch off the display.

All this impressive functionality is only about the power analyzing part of gordian. We have not touched yet the power filtering capabilities of this great device. Behind the scenes an adaptive network of passive elements (capacitors and inductors) undertakes the critical work of gently cleaning up your power. And it really IS adaptive and genteel. Every single piece of information that the analyzer gathers is taken into account for automatically adjusting the filter configuration to match the characteristics of your power line optimally. The filter can be configured in 4 different setups. It can be soft or aggressive, it can target to noise that lives in both our phase and neutral wires (Common Mode Filtering) or to noise that lives between the wires (Differential Mode Filtering) or to both of them. The correct decision will be taken by the gordian main processor or you can experiment with the different configurations and manually select the preferred setup. This is equivalent to having 4 different power conditioners and always using the one that best matches the characteristics of your power line.

gordian also performs power factor correction! Our audio or multimedia systems tend to behave like inductive loads. Inductive loads usually demonstrate a low Power Factor. This means that are not good at effectively absorbing the power of our electrical networks. This can be fixed by connecting a "bank" of large capacitors to our load and make it behave more like a resistance than an inductor. Some, power conditioning systems offers this functionality as a feature but it also can be a real disaster for our power quality, because if the connected capacitance is larger than the required one, this can damage further the power factor of our system. However, Gordian will automatically calculate and connect the optimal amount of capacitance to get the Power Factor of our system to the maximum feasible level. It will automatically detect the best capacitance option among the four available but the owner may also experiment and manually setup the Power Factor Correction module. Last but not least we have to add the over-voltage protection that Gordian incorporates to protect our devices from high voltage peaks.

**Stratos Vichos**



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**CLEARAUDIO SMART MATRIX PROFESSIONAL RECORD CLEANING MACHINE**

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**Hifi Pig****RECOMMENDED**

**G**erman brand Clearaudio produce a couple of record cleaning machines (RCMs), the Double Matrix Professional Sonic and the less pricey Smart Matrix Professional which is the subject of this review. The unit retails in the UK for £775.

The SMP arrives very well packed with a Perspex lid (an option), vacuum arm, record clamp, 100ml of fluid to get you started, a microfiber brush to apply the

fluid, some spare microfiber strips and of course the unit itself.

The unit weighs a little over 11Kg, measures 13.58inch square and stands 9.84 inches high. It's basically a solid wooden box with a thin aluminium skin/veneer to keep it protected from water. On the front you have the operating buttons – power on/standby, platter rotation and vacuum on/off. Atop the box at the business end of the machine is the platter which has a soft foam mat on it. Here you also

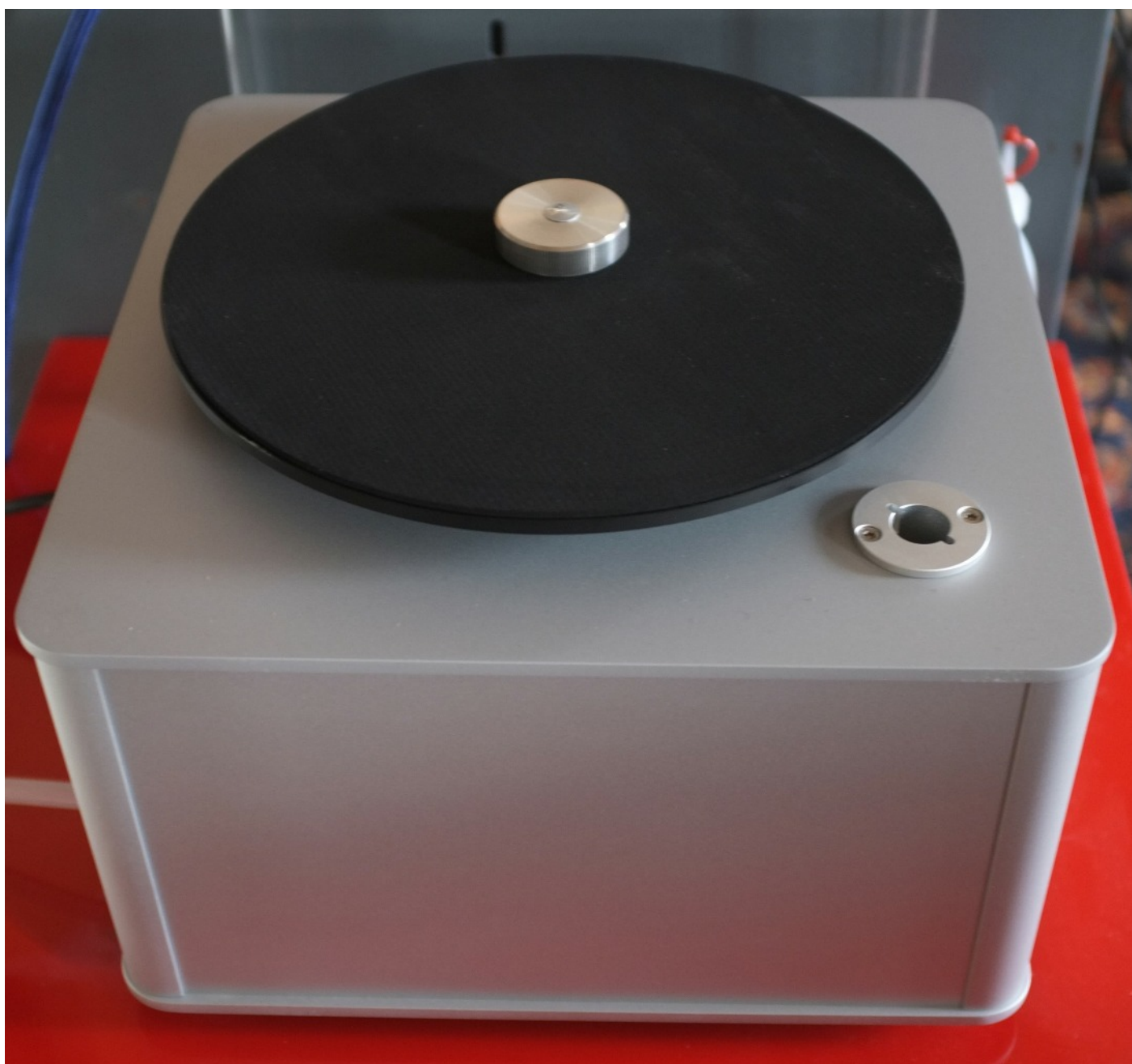
## CLEARAUDIO SMART MATRIX PROFESSIONAL RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

fit the vacuum arm which is basically a slotted metal tube (see pic above) with microfiber strips either side of the slot to stop your precious records getting scratched. Clearaudio say these strips should last around 200 sides of very dirty records. It is this slot in the arm that sucks the fluid from your record. Round the back you've got a power connector with an on off switch and a plastic tube with a bung in it for emptying the dirty water tank.

Assembly is a piece of cake with you only having to push the vacuum arm into the hole in the top plate and plug the unit into the mains.

I set the RCM up on an IKEA table for the test.

Cleaning your records is a simple process. Switch it on at the back, remove the vacuum arm, place the record on the platter and screw it down with the record clamp and then replace the vacuum arm. Press the power button which spins the platter clockwise, put the cleaning brush against the record and squirt a bit of the fluid onto the record and let the record spin round a few times in both directions...you change direction by pressing the "platter" button. If you have really filthy records spin the platter more times and repeat the whole process including vacuuming – I buy a lot of my records second hand from brocantes and car boot fairs and most are filthier than a very filthy thing...use your imagination. To initiate the actual vacuuming process you have to press the button



## CLEARAUDIO SMART MATRIX PROFESSIONAL RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

marked “vacuum” (no surprises there), the arm is sucked onto the record surface and then you let the machine do its thing until your record is perfectly dry. Turn the machine off, swing the arm out of the way, turn your record over and repeat.

When in the vacuum phase the machine is pretty noisy...the cat, initially curious at this new spinning round device, ran away and hid when I pushed the vacuum button...but then she does when we vacuum the carpets so no surprise there.

The first record I cleaned was a recent buy from a second hand shop and was Joaquin Rodrigo Concierto De Aranjuez with Alirio Diaz on one side and Mauro Giuliani Concerto Pour Guitare, Cordes et Timbales OP 30 on the other. It's from 1967 and had been poorly kept and very dirty. I had to do one side a couple of times and increased the number of rotations of the platter during the cleaning process, but the result was a spankingly clean record that played with barely a snap, crackle or pop.

### CONCLUSION

The Clearaudio Smart Matrix Professional is a piece of cake to use, well built and does what it says on the tin. Yes it is quite pricey, but the question needs to be asked is it cheaper to extend the life of your stylus and irreplaceable records...I reckon this is money well spent and infinitely easier than my previous manual affair. It's difficult for me to compare this unit to any of the others on the market I'm afraid as I've just not used any of the similar machines, but I'm happy with it and feel it offers a good deep clean. Definitely a keeper and is my xmas present to myself...I've already ordered fifteen litres of IPA ( Isopropyl Alcohol ) to make up some cleaning solution which should



keep me going!

**Build Quality: 8.75**

**Ease Of Use: 8.5** (a fully automatic machine would be a great luxury)

**End Result: 9**

**Value For Money: 8.35**

**Overall: 8.65**

**Pros:**

**Good cleaning**

**Easy to use**

**Solid build**

**Cons:**

**Quite pricey**

**Not automated**

**Stuart Smith**



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**Black Cat cables are the brainchild of Chris Sommovigo and are handmade in Japan. Dave Robson takes a listen to the company's Redlevel Tube speaker cable (\$450 for a 1.5m pair) and RCA interconnects (\$350 for 1m).**

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



### **Black Cat Redlevel Tube Speaker Cable.**

**I**t must be near Christmas, vacuum cleaner, carpet cleaner and iron have all packed in! I've been waiting desperately for the Postman to arrive to bring my replacement Steam Iron; crinkly work shirts are annoying me! This morning the knock arrives! Methinks a rather large box for an iron. It's heavy to one end, no wor-

ries. It's at this point a notice that this box has been shipped from Japan! From Kanagawa no doubt, from Black Cat Audio Cables, (High Fidelity Partners).

For those like myself who are not familiar with Black Cat Audio Cables, these are high end, Audiophile Analogue and Digital hifi cables. These are designed and made by Chris Sommovigo himself, a passionate music lover and cable designer who is known for the Morpheus and NeoMorpheus cables among others.

**BLACK CAT REDLEVEL TUBE SPEAKER CABLE AND RCA INTERCONNECTS**

Chris has moved his home and workshop this year from the USA to Japan. Recent communications with Chris with regards to his new speaker cable design and how he has created his new cable has left me wondering if I ever went to school at all. His knowledge and passion for what he creates is immense. Not a traditional construction, these cables use a Tube style

pure copper inner core; this is designed to reduce skin effect. This and several other innovations by Chris have led to the development of his new cable design. Retailing at \$450 1.5 metre pair or \$750 for a 3 metre pair.

**OUT OF THE BOX**

The speaker cables out of the box are beautifully made. Nice and flexible, the use of thick, but flexible shrink wrap to cover the terminal ends to the 4mm banana plugs offer reassuring quality. The multifilament nylon, black and red outer covering looks and feels quality and durable. It's not garish in colour at all. These speaker cables are available in 1.5m and 3m lengths at the moment. A bi-wire variant is not available at this time of writing.

Either end of the cable there is an RCA style aluminium outer casing where at this point the cable splits into its long red/black +/- terminations. This connector is covered in a thick, clear length of shrink wrap. This holds everything securely in place. The 4mm banana plugs are a new design to me. They are shorter than regular plugs I'm familiar with and are engineered to a good standard and gold plated. They fit nice and securely with their associated sheathing not getting in the way of the sockets. Chris can supply 4mm banana and spade end terminations.

I hook up the cables and start out by leaving them connected with repeat playing on the CD player. I'm quite lucky to have a separate annexe to my living room to use for my hifi and home A/V system. I purposely try not to listen in the music room for the

**Running through other Mac tracks on the album percussion and drums are very well presented, metal cymbals, guitar strings and bells come through with a definite edge, very realistic, not crashy or smashy, with the decay from cymbals lasting that micro second longer, a nice smooth decay to the notes bringing a "live" feeling to the instruments.**

first few days as I believe all cables take a few days to settle and burn in. Some may disagree with this method or belief, but I don't want to pick up any bad vibes at this point, although from what I do hear there is nothing to speak of except an increase in bass. I have the house to myself for the next 2 days so let's say the neighbours may not be enjoying the burn in

process during this time as much as I am!!!

**SOUND**

After 10 days of having these cables running in, sometimes on constantly for several hours and overnight, I'm happy that enough signal has passed through them and any variations in sound quality will have ironed itself out. There may be slight changes with more use but I'm confident this would be minimal.

Initial listening over the last week or so, I have noticed a rise in the bass quality and quantity over my own cables. There is more detail and more information getting to the speakers. It's a quality bass not boom and bang. This isn't as much a night and day scenario, more of an enrichment.

**Time to Rock and Roll!**

Loading in disc1 of Fleetwood Mac's Very Best I flick to "Dreams". The intro of the rhythmic bass, drums and tick of the cymbals trip out with confidence. The bass is tight, not tubby or loose. It's not bleeding into other areas either, which can sometimes happen as bass rises. Stevie Nicks vocals coming over honey like, smooth and warm, allowing you to settle into the track and immediately making you feel comfortable. There is added space around instruments, an inky black space giving an open, wide soundstage allowing a living area to the music. Moving onto "You Make Loving Fun" it's becoming apparent that the "old" arc of my soundstage has changed somewhat. All the instruments are there, but some have



## BLACK CAT REDLEVEL TUBE SPEAKER CABLE AND RCA INTERCONNECTS

lessened or increased in their volume and intensity. This gives the impression of greater depth from front to back; Christine McVie's vocals have gained an edge and pushing forward from the recording with more insight into her vocal talents. Running through other Mac tracks on the album percussion and drums are very well presented, metal cymbals, guitar strings and bells come through with a definite edge, very realistic, not crashy or smashy, with the decay from cymbals lasting that micro second longer, a nice smooth decay to the notes bringing a "live" feeling to the instruments.

You can hear the rattle and vibration from plucked strings. These may have been subliminally there before but they are now outed and adding to the atmosphere on tracks like "The Chain". The well documented affairs within Fleetwood Mac while Rumours was being recorded to me comes to light on "Go Your Own Way", Mick Fleetwood's anger and emotions spilling into his drumming on the track, the Tube cables bringing the bite and attack on the skins out beautifully. One of my favourite Fleetwood Mac tracks is "World Turning" it's an older recording from their first album (I think). With the Black Cat Tube cables in place, the vocals which once lay slightly in the back ground are now wrapped around the room. I feel I'm inside the music and its cossetting me and holding my focus. There is a point where the music pauses and the bass drum kicks in, the wallop that comes out of my small floorstanding speakers is like being at a rock concert! A tight and punchy sound, it's not overdone or overbearing in any way. What these cables can drag out from the amplifier and instruct your speakers to do is amazing and beyond what you would expect.

Changing CDs to Supertramp's Crime Of The Century album and "Bloody well Right", the piano intro has no electronic buzz, fizz or unpleasant resonance that can be heard from electric piano notes. There is also a lot of space around the instruments and musicians and this gives the impression that the soundstage is stretched to as far as my room and equipment can take it. It stays surefooted, and as the music gets complicated keeps its composed without getting ruffled or shouty. The same can be said for "Asylum" the more complicated sections of music with other set ups has tripped itself up, not with the Black Cat Redline Tube cables in place. All nicely controlled without holding the music back.

These cables are very revealing. Which as your probably aware is a slight double edged sword, bringing great satisfaction to good recordings, but showing up poor recordings too. Throwing "Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong on the "Verve" label into the drive is like sitting in a room with the pair of old masters. Ella's fantastic voice standing out proud and hearing Louis throaty grumbles before he has even started singing (this was not noticeable before with other lesser cables) showing this cable brings detail to your speakers that you may not have realised that they were capable of.

My final test disc is a new artist to me which was given to me by Alan Clark of Kralk Audio (see last months speaker review). An excellent album, if not a little different to mainstream music by Scott Wainwright. Titled "Every Man Has His Critics". The album is recorded leaving instruments quite raw and forward. This is great to hear how individual instruments interact and sound on your speakers. Drums, cymbals, harmonicas, strings, whistles, bells and even a tuba makes an appearance! Recorded with little faffing to the sound, piano finely weighted and detailed, the Black Cat cables leaving you in no doubt what each instrument should sound like. Scott's growling vocals offset by the sweet, sweet female co-singers. All the feelings and emotions tripping out on a musical parade with lyrics cleanly layered and portrayed.

### CONCLUSION

These are great cables. The technology and attention to detail in their construction is far more than your run of the mill multi-strand copper gubbins. The hand crafted quality comes in at a relatively premium price, but if your equipment warrants this level then these are a must audition listing.

If you want to hear the absolute maximum that your speakers are capable of you need to hear these. It may seem like a silly notion to add a cable that may be a similar price to your speakers themselves, but Black Cat Redlevel Tube speaker cables will give you everything you need to push the performance capabilities of your equipment to its limits and show you exactly what you may have been missing. The only real downside I can speak of is that they won't massage or dress up a poor recording. If the drums have been recorded like plastic topped yogurt pots, then they will sound like plastic topped yogurt pots, if the vocals have been badly recorded then this is what you will hear. There is a very slight warmth to the sound and

**BLACK CAT REDLEVEL TUBE SPEAKER CABLE AND RCA INTERCONNECTS**

bass is brought out tight and strong. If the acoustics of your listening room or your system is a little boomy then a careful audition is required. The cables took a good 10 days to fully bed in and settle. The wait was worth it.

**Build Quality: 8.75**

**Sound Quality: 8.9**

**Value for money: 8.75**

**Overall: 8.8**

**Pros/ Great sound, realistic and faithful, with good bass and detail. Well made, flexible with great terminations/banana plugs.**

**Cons. May sound a little warm vocally with some types of recordings. Won't hide poor recordings.**

### **Black Cat Redlevel "Tube" RCA Interconnects.**

The cables arrive in a smart flat box, emblazoned with the "Redlevel" motif on the top leaf.

Out the box, these like Chris Sommovigo's "Tube" speaker cables (*see later in this review*) are

well made and attractive looking cables. The custom, handmade finish is good and again the same red and black shielding looks tough and durable.

The custom "Lovecraft" RCA connectors are made specifically to Chris's specifications and look the business -an alloy outer, with a gold plated gripping inner core. All solidly held in place with tough but flexible red / black shrink-wrap, covered over with a thick, clear shrink-wrap. The cables are nicely flexible, and I'm assured by Chris himself that he has tested the durability of the tube style copper cores by twisting and bending them without the tube structure failing or kinking, even after being wound around a screwdriver shaft! It is good to know that their ability to take some abuse has been tested at source. Holding the cables in your hands they do feel like quality items.

This description is taken from Chris's website:

"The Tube" is based upon an evolution of our very first and most enduring product concept: Morpheus (and NeoMorpheus). In this latest iteration, we use the same form-factor as our exception "Coeur" interconnect, and then use the air-filled PTFE tube to run an air-filled pure copper tube (CuTube™) down the centre. Lower dielectric constant, higher velocity, lower



**BLACK CAT REDLEVEL TUBE SPEAKER CABLE AND RCA INTERCONNECTS**

capacitance, the skin effect profile of a 32 awg wire with the low resistance of a 22 awg wire”.

I’ve decided to audition the RCA cable with my own speaker cable in place so I have an accurate idea of their capabilities and sound style, and knowing my own sound will help this. I will review both the tube speaker and RCA cables together later on.

I connect the lovecraft RCA connectors to the Audiolab CDQ, they slide on easily. Some may like a tighter fit, they are not loose by any means and there is no play in the connection but a stray hand may just dislodge them.

Again after several days of running in with different kinds of music playing, giving 50-75 hours of use, I’m happy to sit down and give them a proper audition.

**THE SOUND**

Sliding in Steely Dan’s “Gaucho” CD and hitting play on “19” brings out the Black Cats tight, powerful bass lines. Deep and smooth, not flabby or uncouth. Vocals come through nice and clear with a smooth honey like quality. The sound comes through with speedy and rhythmical timing. “Time Out Of Mind” is selected next, cymbal and percussion is sharp and clear with just the right amount of crispness without being harsh. Piano is weighted just right with a wide and controlled soundstage to boot. Throughout the other tracks on this album I note that some vocals before adding the Black Cat Tube cable into my set up can have a slight “Lispyness” to them. This isn’t the case with it now. There is no harshness to the “SSSSS” sounds, all very rounded and smooth. Again like the other cables Chris supplied, these seem neutral and very detailed, and very easy to listen to... maybe a slight warmth, but unless you have an overly warm system it will only enhance your listening pleasure, thus, to the point I keep having to go back to the beginning of the track as I’ve been lulled into a very relaxed state and I’ve just forgotten to be critical! These RCA’s are a bit more forgiving of poor recordings too. Some music I found to be unlistenable or fatiguing in the past is a bit more palatable.

And so to something a bit more upbeat. Foreigner “4”. Time to separate the men from the boys! This album can be a little muddled with the driving drums and percussion, which can put your nerves on edge while listening at times. I’m happy to announce that the vocals and other sounds are kept well apart. The drums on “Juke Box Hero” are kept at the rear, still defined and driving the track. The backing vocals too,

sitting in the gods up out the way of lead vocals. Soundstage front to back is a deep experience. It’s not immediately apparent until you actually go looking (listening) for it. You realise that the music isn’t so much to your left or right, but it’s surrounding you. You’re in a bit of a Black Cat vortex. Turning the volume up to unhealthy levels, it’s as close to being there as you can imagine.

Phil Collins comes to visit! Not in person (he is busy coming out of retirement), in the guise of his “Face Value” album. “In The air Tonight” just has to be turned up for the drums, the strike of the sticks on the skins is so just right, the power smacking you hard but never distorted or overdone. “The Roof Is Leaking” starts with the sound of Crickets. These are usually above the speakers, today they are in my head, chirping away merrily. There is also a sound I’ve never heard before, just before the piano starts somebody shifts bodyweight and mumbles something. I’ve never heard this before, or it’s never been noticeable. The “Tube” cable brings out the finest detail your equipment can muster mister, that’s a fact.

**CONCLUSION**

A fine product from Chris Sommovigo’s workshop in Japan. These Redlevel “Tube” RCA’s retail for \$350 per Metre and with a maximum of 3m. The cables are quite neutral, maybe adding a little warmth to some systems. They bring out and convey great detail to music doing nothing negative to your listening experience. There was a little rounding off on some percussion sounds but that was recording specific and not something across all music. A fast and tight sound producing good timing and rhythms, thus inducing great foot tapping sessions. There are some camps that say you don’t need expensive cables (see “Cable Wars” article ). It’s my opinion that spending on high quality cables like these is not just a way to upgrade your equipment it’s more of an investment. A rock or springboard as to which you can judge all future upgrades and make lifetime purchase decisions on.

**Build Quality: 8.5**

**Sound Quality: 8.8**

**Value for Money: 8.6**

**Overall: 8.6**

**Pros/ neutral sound, should fit into any system.**

**Cons/ RCA plugs could do with being a little tighter.**



**BLACK CAT REDLEVEL TUBE SPEAKER CABLE AND RCA INTERCONNECTS****Black Cat Redlevel “Tube” Speaker and RCA. Used Simultaneously.**

Cables have always proved a bit of a minefield for me. They are the final piece of the jigsaw when assembling a hifi system, giving their accent to what comes out of the speakers. This final acquisition doesn't necessarily have to be very costly, but getting enough cables to try out can be a difficult situation to be in, especially if your using a new hifi retailer or your new to the game. The 10% rule of thumb was always a good place to start for me...£1000 system and £100 on cables...but using these Black Cat “Tube” cables has slightly altered my perspective on this. If your prepared to push that %%% rule higher then you can really hear what your system is capable of.

Having added the “tube” speaker cables into the mix I was expecting certain things to be multiplied up. Earlier in the reviews I mentioned that some tracks showed a warmer side and I was expecting to have to report that they got overly warm or perhaps too smooth. This isn't the case. Everything is just right. I've tried to catch the Black Cats out with poor compilation type recordings, with bass heavy tracks and multi-layered material.

Together the Redlevel cables just now seem to smooth over any cracks and strip back any harshness. Detail

is still there, nothing has been lost. The innovative construction Chris Sommovigo has put into his cables gives the smoothness of a multi-core copper cable with the deep bass and sweet mid-upper of pure silver cables. Stereo imaging is pin sharp, depth perspective is good, giving the musicians a very definite place in the soundstage. Music leaves the speakers and travels around your listening space, bringing you into contact with the instruments in a more intimate “feeling” way. It is like being there. My only real criticism and it is only on a miniscule number of recordings I've listened to over the last 2-3 weeks, is that some bass heavy male vocals can seem a little warm and could do with being a bit more forward. This though is far outweighed by the number of tracks I once found irritating but now find enjoyable. They do take quite a few hours to burn in and settle down but the wait is worth it.

**FINAL SAY**

These cables should fit virtually any system, improving or enhancing your listening pleasure. Ask your dealer to get some in, Pronto.

**Overall Verdict: 8.7**

**Dave Robson**



THEY DON'T FEEL  
WHAT YOU FEEL  
THEY DON'T SEE  
WHAT YOU SEE  
THEY DON'T HEAR  
WHAT YOU HEAR  
THEY DON'T HAVE  
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# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY  
JANINE ELLIOT



I remember being given a device called a Brush-Mail-A-Voice which was a dictation machine like a record player on which you placed a foldable 9" disk with grooves on it that a curvy arm with a magnetic head "stylus" recorded magnetic impulses onto the grooves from a microphone, and then you used the same microphone as a speaker to play it all back. I was only about 4 or 5 at the time and I took it all apart as it didn't work. Don't know what happened to it, but it was already 25 years old when I first played with it. That was my first interest in audio, and the device was in some ways the forerunner of the floppy disc or even CD, playing as it did from the centre to the edge. Around this time my mother was a secretary, often typing up words that had been previously recorded onto a Dictaphone "Dictabelt", a design from

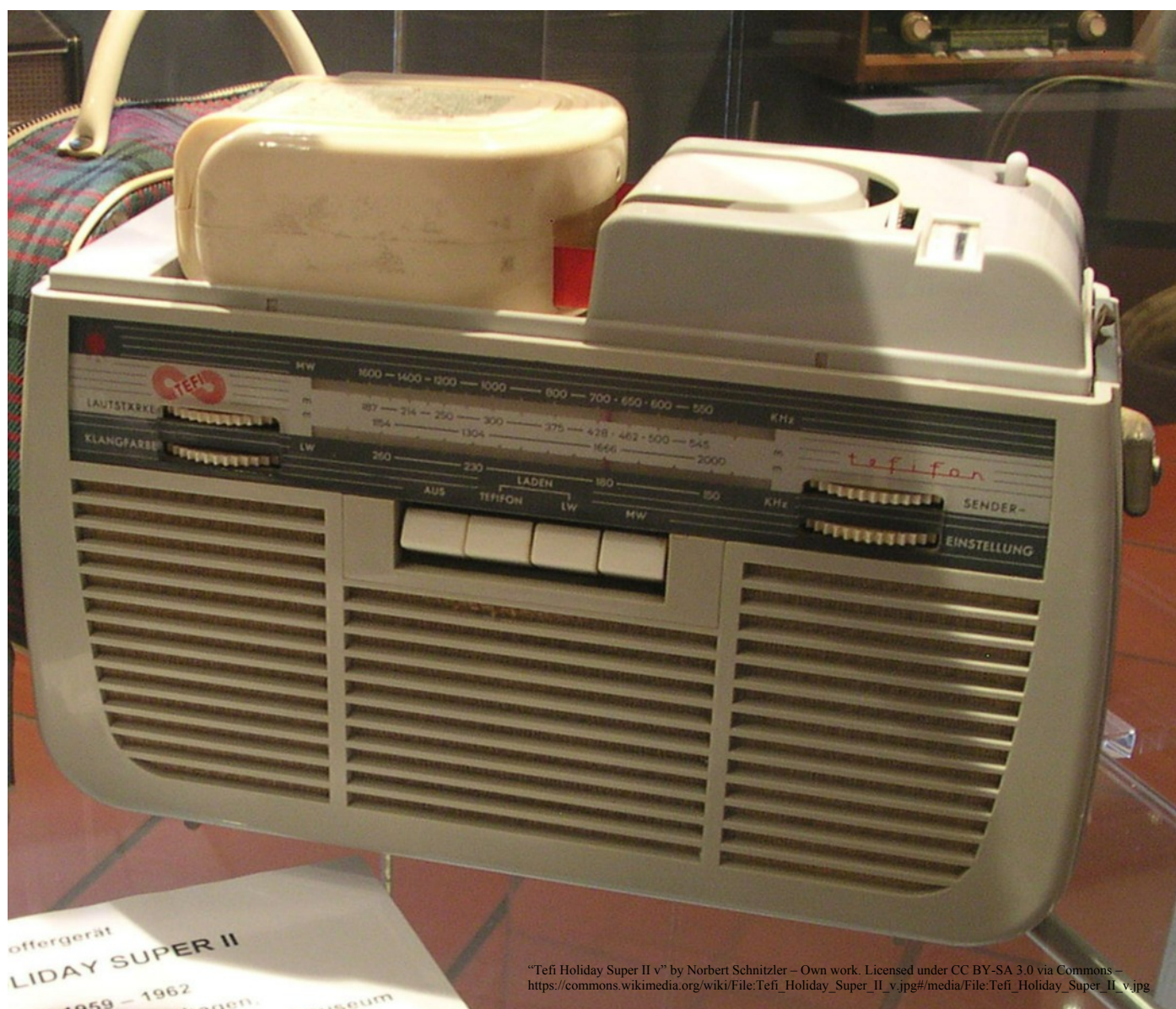
**Janine Elliot takes another look at retro audio kit, this time focusing on the rare Tefifon.**



1947-1970, though the belts, a thin plastic belt 3.5-inches wide and 12-inches in circumference could only be recorded once, providing

up to 15 minutes of dictation (30 minutes on the rare long play versions). The recordings are pressed into the plastic by a stylus, a bit





"Tefi Holiday Super II v" by Norbert Schnitzler – Own work. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons – [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tefi\\_Holiday\\_Super\\_II\\_v.jpg#/media/File:Tefi\\_Holiday\\_Super\\_II\\_v.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tefi_Holiday_Super_II_v.jpg#/media/File:Tefi_Holiday_Super_II_v.jpg)

like wax cylinders from many years before. The belts could be folded and recordings could withstand 20 plays before they were unplayable.

Another of my memories from the past was the 8 track player, playing a single ¼" tape which played at 3 3/4ips feeding tape from the centre of the "reel" and feeding it back to the edge. It meant that 8 different pieces could be on each track of the single reel of tape,

with a length of metal foil joining the tape together and telling the head to move to the next track, and all held inside a cartridge. The design originated in 1952 by American Bernard Cousino, and a similar design called the Fidelipac was used by me and other broadcasters and DJs until the 1990's, commonly called "cart machines". The original idea of an endless cartridge comes from 1946 from a certain William Powell Lear, the

inventor later of the Lear Jet, with an endless steel wire, itself based on an idea by Western Electric/AT&T Technology from 1933. Indeed the idea of a cartridge containing tape is a fascinating and complicated study. Whilst some of us remember buying 8 track or stereo 4-track machines before cassettes tapes (invented in 1962) took over, round this time there are several other recording/playback mediums that

# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO...BY JANINE ELLIOT

have tried and failed. Things like the Fidelipac (1959), the PlayTape (1966), Mail Call Letterpack (late 60's), and the RCA Victor Sound Tape Cartridge (1958) which was a 5"x7" tape cartridge with ¼ inch tape looking much like the Sony Elcaset which morphed in 1976. But before all that was a unique playback system that was a cross between the tape cartridge and the record.

With a name that sounds more like a material for saucepans, the Tefifon from 1952 is quite a cute little German invention that, well, unlike everything today never quite made itself past the borders. Only in America was it slightly successful under the "Westrex" name, a subsidiary of Western Electric. A decidedly curvy little plastic number and looking more like a toy for young girl, this device had cartridges, called "Tefi's" that played like those 8 track cartridges, and similar to the Dictaphone Dictabelt, the cassette "tape" was red plastic with grooves like a record that the stylus head played. The Tefifon format itself was originally thought of and developed by the German entrepreneur Dr. Karl Daniel and his "Tefi" company in 1936.

The Tefofon was amazingly good quality, and the tape could last as long as 4 hours, an amazing achievement for the time. A whole



Wagner Ring Cycle could fit into four tapes! Each size of tape was a different length of tape, with the smallest being 15 minutes. Bear in mind in 1952 most people were used to 78ips shellac which lasted only 4 minutes! This invention was therefore an amazing achievement for the time. You clicked in the cartridge, pulled out the plastic tape around the roller and pressed in the head and it started playing. The plastic tape was actually an endless groove, so unlike the 8 track, you just pressed play and it worked its way to the end, rather than you or a sensor switching tracks. Roughly speaking, if you play the looped tape once through, a four hour loop would take around four minutes to loop, which would mean there must be 60 "grooves" on the plastic tape. Some models even had a remote control (though on a lead) to move the head up or down, in case you wanted to miss sections, or you could just move a wheel on the

device to move the head, a pick-up cartridge on its side, up or down.

Most Tefi's started with an introductory chime to let you know it's the beginning, and at the end was a looped "chime" to warn you that it is the end and give you time to get off your chair and switch it all off. Whilst only mono the sound quality was amazingly good. What let it down was the bad distribution and promotion, and because of this the fact the library of recorded music wasn't that great either. Perhaps memories of the Second World War had a part in its failure abroad as well. Such a shame! This was a great idea, just as the DCC I wrote about a few months ago, and it could have been big. The last incarnation of the Tefifon format was in 1961, when they introduced stereo sound, but again even this was not commercially successful, so Tefifon production was wound up, like the tape itself, in 1965.

Janine Elliot



# THE VOICE OF DOM!



**THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF  
AN AUDIOPHILE AT THAT TENDER  
AGE...BY DOMINIC MARSH**

**I**t has long puzzled me how any two people can hear different things in a hifi system and how they come to a conclusion that it can sound “right” for them, yet sound completely “wrong” to another person.

When we come to reading show reports, it has always baffled me how a collective of people can manage to demonstrate such diverse views of what they hear and most of them in all probability will conflict with what I myself have heard. Quite often I have walked into a demonstration where some individuals are engaged in the infamous “toe tapping” (Usually out of time too I might add LOL) which others will have facial expressions that look like they are draining the very last drop of juice out of a lemon segment, while some hold a facial expression rather befitting a corpse. I think the best observations to be made is

**Dominic Marsh gets puzzled over the differences people hear with identical products and explains how he goes about evaluating and listening to new kit.**

when two or more people are walking out of the demonstration and listening to what comments they pass between them. This of course can range from “crap” to “stunning” and every permutation in between, or can be couched in other nondescript terms like “If I had the money . . . ” or “I get better sound at home for less”. I often wonder if someone else hears that kind of comment on the way \*IN\* to a demonstration can also inject

some pre-judgment into the scenario. Interesting theory perhaps, but worth musing over at some point later in time. I have heard so may show systems with frightening price tags that have honky, booming, uncontrolled bass or shrieking treble, yet even so the amount of people that emerge from these rooms with a big grin on their faces could be they have a very low expectation of what real



music SHOULD actually sound like.

A recent interconnect cable thread on one of the forums has also elicited that same diverse pool of opinion. Some members have stated that it is or might be a “system synergy” thing with the cable responding only in tandem with what it has been connected to; hence we get diametrically opposed opinions about it from that source of information. Some say that there is some sort of bias or hidden agenda going on that effectively kills a valid opinion straight off the starting blocks. More likely in that instance though is that some people have been swayed by another person’s effusive comments about their experiences with the cable and have effectively “preconditioned” their minds into expecting a certain level of performance entirely based upon another person’s enthusiasm and it has proved not to be so – with a resulting crash in perception probably greater than if nothing was said by anyone else beforehand. I say it’s not pleasant listening for me personally as I have owned various incarnations of the cable in question and don’t give a hoot what anyone else thinks.

As in the case of show reports, I believe that a good number of people will also have a favourite fre-

**Without exception, every design I know of personally has always been built as a prototype from drawings, then fine tuned afterwards by human ear for a better sound.**

quency band for their listening preferences, as in for example people that are almost fanatical about treble/midband/bass performance (delete as applicable), yet are rather non-plussed or less concerned how the other frequencies are performing which are not their priori-

ty or listening focus, while others are looking for a more generalised tonal character to the ‘wall of sound’ kind of thing which they perceive as a whole entity with little concern for the minutiae of individual notes, timbres and harmonics. Some adore the boom and tish and care not what the midband sounds like, others conversely revile that kind of sound. Maybe it’s simply because people will eulogise about only the positive aspects which pleases them and ignore the negatives until questioned what those are.

The biggest conundrum to me has always been how the objectivists claim to readily turn technical specifications into a predictable and consistent resulting sound. Never met any one of them yet that could tell the difference between a 30pf/metre and a 300pf/metre cable and they can only nod sagely when someone has told them which is which, but if it pleases them that one is ten times greater than the other then who am I to question that? They also claim that a good design off paper will translate into a good sounding component, but I have never known that to ever happen, except maybe for purely digital designs. Without exception, every design I know of personally has always been built as a prototype from drawings, then fine tuned

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afterwards by human ear for a better sound. That too very much depends upon whose ear is being used in that process. Or in some cases, how far back the accountants have dictated what the production costs should be pared to.

So, then good readers of Hifi Pig Magazine, how does ‘yours truly’ listen?

I prefer to do my listening in several stages and it matters not whether it is a personal purchase or if I have been asked to evaluate a component. If a new item is being delivered by whatever means, a simple and quick functionality test to make sure whoever delivered it to me has not turned it into a twisted mangled mess. Lights on, no smoke, no rattles, nothing is falling off and it makes a noise of some description and it has passed test number one, then it is switched off and ignored. It also allows me to put away any euphoria I might have accumulated waiting for the doorbell to ring when the courier arrives, the delight of opening the box or packaging, disposal or storage of said packaging, lugging components in and out of the rack and the commensurate connecting up, all of which will affect everyone’s stress levels to some degree or other I reckon, even the most hardened of professional reviewers who are indeed no strangers to such carryings on.

Next, usually twenty four hours later, I have to then take into account whether this component requires some burn in, burn out, or burn up, so this is the ideal time to commence that process, then add on my own system’s warm up time for optimal performance. If I intend to do a “serious” evaluation, I make sure I am not hungry or too full either, neither hot nor cold body temperature wise, the phone is disconnected, plus the intake and outtake of errrrrm “fluids” is taken care of too. Sounds a bit like an athlete limbering up for an event, but in my role as a reviewer it has to be done and I firmly believe that any potential source of stress is addressed accordingly for consistent listening results.

A blind ABX testing panel hasn’t done any of this “limbering up” process beforehand, so that to me immediately puts the test at a grave disadvantage at best and invalidates it at worst, quite aside from the fact that the moment any notion of a “test” is mentioned the stress levels are already climbing steadily before even the first note is heard. It is bizarre anyway that an objective outcome is sought with an utter reliance on so many subjective elements, the greatest of which is the variability of the human test participants. Go figure!

First part of my listening then is a general impression of whether or not this newly introduced component pleases me or not. It doesn’t have to be a reference or favourite recording either because that takes me into the realms of dissecting what I am hearing and I want to avoid that at this stage. I have plenty of boot sale and charity shop cheap music purchases lurking at the bottom of the rack that are ideal for this purpose, so it could be anything from Mrs Mills, to folk music, to Stravinsky and anything in between, so it gets put into the CD drawer and the play button hit. I simply listen for overall tonality and nothing else. It is very rare, but not unknown, for a component to stumble even at this early stage but there have been one or two over the years which have been quickly consigned to that popular auction website from personal purchases or returned to the submitting source for a review item. Conversely too, there have only been three items that really did grab me instantly and I fell in love with from that first contact, all of which I kept and enjoyed for many years. If I do go to a show or have a demo at a dealer’s premises, then truthfully this is far as I can realistically take an audition, because the system, room, choice of music, are all unfamiliar and it’s a black and white kind of judg-

## THE VOICE OF DOM!

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF  
AN AUDIOPHILE AT THAT TENDER  
AGE...BY DOMINIC MARSH

ment whether I like what I hear or not – even if I do take my own favourite music along. I don't think I am alone in these situations, but I would dearly like to know where you all of you go after just listening to tonality alone in your own familiar surroundings.

Next, out comes the reference recordings that I know forwards and backwards intimately over many years. Incidentally, I have often heard that a human's aural memory has a very short time span akin to a goldfish some say, but let me tell you this, I recently bought a CD that I last heard in the late nineteen eighties and I recalled it note for note and beat for beat, even down to the vocalist's distinctive inflections. Am I somebody special to be able to do this? I think not.

You may not have heard nor indeed like my choices of music, but they have key elements for me contained within them that I know so well, rather than select an assault course of tortuous music that only the finest of systems can jump over, do battle with and conquer. I then split the listening into three sections, focusing on treble, mid and bass registers, mostly playing a track three times, concentrating each time on just one of those three elements and completely ignoring the other two for

**I don't then see myself as judge, jury and executioner (for want of a better phrase) with my evaluations, I simply report what I find and then let the readers decide for themselves based upon what I have written in my review.**

the moment. I can do all three simultaneously of course with music I know very well, because the cues I am listening out for will arrive at a particular time so I can switch back and forth as necessary in plenty of time. Funnily enough, I have taught this listening method to several people over the years and they were more than content prior to that with listening to a transistor radio and music in the

car, but now they are very critical listeners with full blown hifi systems of their own. I have created monsters!

So to some up then, a reviewer like me is trying to preach to a very broad church indeed and that is why I really am loathe to blight or indeed over praise anything that passes through my hands for review, as what may displease me or I find "fault" with (or vice versa), could in fact be absolute Nirvana to many people who are reading the review, even though it may also displease the people who have similar hearing acuity and tastes to myself. I don't then see myself as judge, jury and executioner (for want of a better phrase) with my evaluations, I simply report what I find and then let the readers decide for themselves based upon what I have written in my review.

To make this article have more value than it has, then please feel free to add your comments on how you as an individual listen to music and how you perceive its sound, either in the comments submission panel below, or send an email to the editor Stuart Smith using the address on the contact page of this website. It would be very interesting to see if a general consensus emerges over time.

**Dominic Marsh**



# FIDELITY MATTERS

**A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTEAD**



**T**he world of hifi consists of many differing components but it wouldn't be anywhere with-

out pioneering companies or individuals whose dreams are to make the best product they possibly can.

This pioneering spirit comes out of a passion for music and wanting to share their ideas by making them into realities we, the music lovers, can all enjoy. Now some companies start small and develop into large corporations, whilst others remain compact and bijou. Why companies grow exponentially or remain small is a complex equation and may be for a million and one reasons. Luck, wise investment, having a great idea, being there at the right time, ambition etc., all play their part.

Market forces and the reasons a business exist come in cycles and

**In the last of his Fidelity Matters articles for 2015, Ian Ringstead celebrates innovation wherever it comes from and applauds all the people in the hifi industry who make this wonderful kit possible.**

a company may be short-term or become a long-term growth business that develops and diversifies, ending up at a completely different point from where it started. There are many examples of companies that were started by one man's ideas and now are extremely success-

ful... whether big or small.

Ultimately the world often judges success by how big a company becomes, or the amount of money/profit it makes, and yes, in an accountant's eyes this is the *raison d'être* for existing as a business.

## FIDELITY MATTERS

A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO  
EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY  
IAN RINGSTEAD

But hey, let's remember this is not always the reason a company is initially formed. A great idea or invention don't guarantee wealth and fame and not everyone is driven by making a fortune. Cottage industries and artisan manufacturers are a prime example of this and there are many in the hifi business all over the world, formed by talented individuals who one day have a breakthrough idea that works, or are passionate about their ideas and wish to share them. Being small has its compromises and capital investment is often one of the main limiting factors to developing an idea beyond a concept. We've all seen Dragons Den or similar shows and how people desperately wish to sell their idea/s and become millionaires, but in reality this rarely happens and for the vast majority success is limited or a far off dream.

I always wanted to own my own hifi business, but the truth is it was always going to be a huge risk and I never had the start up capital to realise my dream. Looking back now I am glad I didn't risk my house and possibly my marriage had things gone wrong. I am not criticising anyone who wishes to take that risk and hats off to those that have succeeded, but I bet it wasn't without its share of worries

# Passion is key and so is the desire to please people and give them pleasure from music

and doubts...as is the case with any business start up.

What has this got to do with business now? The economic climate has changed dramatically over the last 50 years and so have the ways we listen and buy hifi equipment. Small cottage businesses still abound but they have to be very savvy in order to survive these days. Small scale means costs are higher for materials as they can't buy in the large quantities in order to get the beneficial discount rates. Inevitably this means their products are not as cheap to manufacture and so their prices are higher, or profit margins are tighter. I have dealt with many small businesses and visited quite a few over

the years and I marvel at how they manage to survive. Grit and determination are admirable qualities and essential to survival as is having absolute faith in your product. Larger companies and economies of scale have their own risks to navigate through and being big means selling big.

Little or large is not the important factor here, neither is better than the other, just different. Passion is key and so is the desire to please people and give them pleasure from music. Live performances are fantastic, but they are only a snapshot in time and like a great holiday become a distant memory with time. The beauty of hifi is that we can enjoy recorded music forever once it has been captured and we can relive the magic time and time again.

So diversity in the hifi business makes for a very interesting spectrum of products and ideas. Analogue or digital is down to individual taste and I see no reason why both can't live happily side by side. As to which is better is again down to personal taste. I like both, but my roots are in analogue and vinyl records still thrill me the most sound-wise, but CDs are very convenient and archiving or streaming has yet to convince me I'm afraid. Luddite I maybe, but that's my choice and like the companies I admire, they choose their

## FIDELITY MATTERS

A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTEAD

path and scale. Large companies have a great deal to offer and the components they produce on huge scale can only benefit the smaller companies. Trickle down technology and research benefit all and new materials make the impossible become a reality...just look at Formula One. Products that were great ideas decades ago can now be built to higher standards and improved upon and often offer exceptional value to the end user.

I have been careful not to mention companies or individuals names as I respect them all and do not wish to show any bias. Of course I have favourites for a number of reasons,

but that is not what this article is about. Music is alive and still moves people emotionally and spiritually. As long as people are motivated to share their passion of music with all of us and provide the means by which to we can listen to it, whether through a superb high-end system or budget system for the masses, hifi will prosper. Look at the Japanese masters of moving coil cartridges over the last few decades. Like Buddhist monks they retreated from the normality of life in general and I can imagine them in their tiny workshops skilfully designing and making their artisan products. So they

were never going to be cheap, but considering the time and skill involved in making these fabulous cartridges the price is worth paying if you admire the quality. Designer watches are no different.

In conclusion music and hifi have always attracted innovative minds full of creative ideas whether in making music or recreating it as accurately as possible. I for one rejoice that these people never cease in coming up with new ideas or products and as an enthusiast there has never been a better time in which to enjoy this joyous pastime.

**Ian Ringstead**

# North West Audio Show

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# THE VIEWS OF STU!

**COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE  
OCCASIONAL TEMPER  
TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH**



**I** was thinking about what to write for this months article and a million and one things went through my mind without really realising that what I should be doing is doing a bit about our year in hifi, but it has been so hectic I barely realised it was getting to that time of year. You know what it's like, you're doing something you really love and just become so entrenched in it that you lose track a bit.

## **Highlights**

2015 has been so full of highlights it's really hard to single a few out of the many but one of the things I really enjoy doing is getting out and about at the shows we do.

This year the main ones for us have been Bristol, [Munich](#), [The North West Audio Show](#) and more recently [Paris](#).

**Stuart Smith looks at the year that was 2015 and hints at a few things you can expect to see in the coming year from Hifi Pig.**

All the shows are very different indeed in both scope and what you see, but the one uniting theme is always the great people that want to say hello and chat with us about Hifi Pig and audio in general.

It was the first time at Bristol for us and it's a really great show. It's very much an event aimed at the end user. Of course there is high-end stuff there as well as more affordable kit, but I like that there is something for everyone and it goes to prove that in this hobby

there are loads of people from myriad different backgrounds, with diverse tastes and with varying budgets. People are queuing well before the doors open which gives you an indication of how important this show is to the UK hifi scene. It's also a great opportunity for us to meet some of our readers and the feedback we got was universally positive, with people saying they enjoy Hifi Pig's slightly different approach to the more traditional and, some may

say, staid hifi media. We love being a bit different and will continue to be so in the coming year.

Munich is a bit of a marathon for Lin and me but we both absolutely adore the High-End show and the city it's held in general. This year we got to meet some of the mags in the US and beyond and had a truly memorable night out with Jeff and Pamela of TONE Audio. When we mentioned to a few folk at the show we'd be spending the night with Americans we were pretty much universally told that we'd be having a relatively quiet night and excessive consumption of booze would be frowned upon. Let's put the record straight on this one, this particular pair of our American friends can booze with the best of them... as was demonstrated by hammering shots of tequila down our necks at 3am in our hotel bar. Linette was especially chuffed at this year's show when a then unknown chap popped up and told her she was the best dressed audio journo he'd ever seen...turned out this was the truly lovely Jason Serinus from Stereophile. Lin's struck up quite a friendship with Jason and he's been recommending some opera for her to get her teeth into...

For me the highlight of this year's Munich was meeting up with the guys from Avantgarde Acoustics

**We obviously  
get a whole  
load of kit  
sent to us for  
evaluation  
and this past  
year we've  
had some  
absolute  
corkers sent  
and the  
reference  
system has  
changed  
accordingly**

and putting in our order for the company's excellent Duo XD loudspeakers, which now take pride of place in Hifi Pig Towers' listening room and reference system.

The North West Audio Show in the UK was brilliant again and despite only being in its second year it is proving to be a firm favourite with both punters and exhibitors

alike. We had an absolute blast and are thoroughly looking forward to this year's event in June which will be over two hotels with free transport between the two.

The Haute Fidélité show in Paris took place just a week after the terrible attacks on the city and it was touch and go as to whether we would make the journey, but we were so pleased we did. There was some great kit on show, we met some great people and there were a few surprises that the city threw up for us... You can read all about it here and here.

### **The Gear**

We obviously get a whole load of kit sent to us for evaluation and this past year we've had some absolute corkers sent and the reference system has changed accordingly. The aforementioned Avantgarde Duo Xd loudspeakers have replaced the hORNS Mummys, the Lampizator Big 7 DAC has replaced the VAD DAC, a Music First Baby Reference V2 is to be the new preamplifier, Merrill Thor amps are the new amps, The Wand tonearm is in place, Graham Slee Elevator EXP and Reflex phonostage take care of the signal coming from the cartridge, a Melco unit holds all our FLACs, an old but very nice Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D CD player spins

## THE VIEWS OF STU!

COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE  
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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH

the silver discs and we've bought a Hifi Pig edition of the Lab 12 gordian mains conditioner. Cables from Tellurium Q, Vermouth Audio, Chord Company and Atlas are all in place too. We've also been putting together a system for when we get less expensive products and ended up with a pair of Leema Xen loudspeakers, Graham Slee Proprius amps and Leema Elements CD player. Many of these products are yet to have their reviews published, but you can look forward to reading them in the New Year. There have been loads more that didn't make the reference system too!

One of the biggest upgrades this year has come from an unexpected area and that has been in the form of room treatment from GIK. We met Dave Shevyn from the company earlier in the year and he asked if we'd be interested in trying the company's products. We did, bought a load of it and will be buying more in the New Year. If you haven't thought of using room treatment previously then you really should...bang for buck it's a huge leap in performance. We'll be doing a full review in the New Year of our experiences with their products!

### The Future

In 2015 we launched columns from our contributors and they've proved to be hugely

**We have never sat on our laurels and 2016 will be no different and we will continue to innovate, change where needed and listen to our tens of thousands of readers to give you what you want to read on our pages.**

popular. [Janine's Retro Bites](#) looks at vintage audio equipment and has been a great hit with loads of folk. Dominic's [Voice Of Dom](#) published an excellent series on mains cables which put the cat amongst the pigeons a bit. Ian's [Fidelity Matters](#) has drawn on his years of experience in the audio retail world. [Linette's Bird's Eye View](#) ruffled a few feathers when she introduced the 'itchy blanket' of gender politics to the hifi world and I had a few tongue in cheek prods of the wasps nest with my [Views Of Stu](#) series of articles. We also had Mike Twomey of Big Kids' Toys in the US write his monthly column giving the [Dealers View](#) on all this mad-

ness. John Scott has done a sterling job with his [music and gig reviews](#) and his [Classic Album](#) series of articles is very well-liked. Thank you all!! We've also interviewed some great characters in the audio world for our [Behind The Brands](#) series and have some fab interviews lined up in the coming year. There is more to come in 2016 from the current contributors...and we have a few surprises in store too if all goes well.

Hifi Pig will continue to do what we do. Sometimes we'll be serious, others not so much, but we'll always endeavour to bring you the latest news (not news that is months old like some sites think is acceptable), the best and most accessible reviews of kit and keep on telling you about what we think is the best music out there!

We have never sat on our laurels and 2016 will be no different and we will continue to innovate, change where needed and listen to our tens of thousands of readers to give you what you want to read on our pages.

May I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you who have taken Hifi Pig to your hearts and wish you a healthy and prosperous New Year, filled with great music and fabulous hifi.

**Stuart Smith**



# BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

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**I** came to realise, after a while, that hifi is a serious addiction. It is never ending, there is always 'just one more upgrade' to be had...the goal being Audio Nirvana. You know the scenario. Latest upgrade is in place, let's say new loudspeakers. Everything is tickety-boo, the music sounds better than ever, it couldn't sound any better, could it.....could it??? Maybe I'll just look at some new amps. Then off you go to see your friendly neighbourhood dealer, the pusher man with all kinds of delights to tempt you, maybe just one more upgrade.

## I Can Quit Anytime

Yeah, right...you're an addict, you are never going to quit. It's obviously a serious addiction. Just like

## Linette Smith asks "What's your drug of choice?".

drug and alcohol addiction there are self help groups, we call them Facebook Groups, where you can take a look at the rest of the members and try to justify your own addiction...you aren't so bad, there are much worse addicts than you, hmmmm. And what's the worst thing to do when you are an addict, yes, hang around with other addicts. We are feeding each others' addiction, perhaps the only way to cope is cold turkey? Our addicted community has several subgroups within it, some are just on gateway drugs and some are fully blown junkies, perhaps beyond saving, here's the signs to look out for as a

concerned friend or relative, or maybe you will just spot yourself!

## Format Addiction

Music is where it all starts and a sure way to spot an Audiophile Addict is by the size of their music collection. They have probably got hundreds if not thousands of CD's, records or tapes and/or hard drives full of more tunes than they will ever have time to listen to. The tangible formats will be arranged into an unfathomable filing system...it's never just A to Z, there's different genres in there too. If you are feeling evil you could really mess with their head by putting a CD back in the wrong



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place deliberately...they may never find it again. This is the equivalent of hiding the last bit of a stoner's stash or 'misplacing' their skins, like I said, evil.

A sure sign that your friend is an Audiophile Addict is if they have the same album in several different formats, and possibly several different copies of each format. You see them out and about and they are buying Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours' on vinyl, again (*guilty as charged m'Lud – Ed*). They just can't help themselves buying music. Vinyl Addicts are particularly hardcore. You can tell when they are feeling flush, they will be buying expensive Jazz imports on

heavy vinyl in pristine packaging from a top end vinyl pusher. When they are skint at the end of the month they still have to scratch that itch but are more likely to be found scuttling about in a charity shop '50p a disc' box, convinced that their 'find' of a rare Wombles' Christmas album will stop them from getting the shakes and keep them going until payday. They will buy a lot of vinyl that will never, ever get played, just because they can't leave it on the shop shelf (*Guilty – Ed*). They will also have a machine, which is a glorified wet 'n' dry Hoover, for cleaning their records. This machine will probably have cost more than non-addicts spend on a record player.

They will scour the net for cheap deals on bulk-buy isopropyl alcohol. If it has got to this stage then they will never shake the habit, you can't help them, no one can....they are heading for the ultimate level of format addiction, reel to reel tapes, and we all know how that ends up. (*mmm...think I may need help – Ed*)

### Off Their Heads

Headfi Addicts have got it bad. Their addiction is portable so it's with them all day every day, not just waiting for them when they get home. The headfi habit bites hard and fast like a crystal meth addiction. The headfi pushers are constantly supplying a stream of lovely new products, planar magnetic headphones so light they are a joy to wear, beautiful bespoke, custom fit in-ears, a new version of a personal music player, portable DACs and amplifiers.....the list is endless. The technology is moving fast and headfi is a 'perfect storm' addiction fused from tech and music, it targets the young and the weak. If headfi was a person it would be some cool, hipster dude wearing rolled up skinny jeans and sporting a beard and a man-bun while skateboarding to work in a



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trendy area of London. The young are easily impressionable. They probably started out, innocently enough, on a soft drug like Beats by Dre or Bose, now they wouldn't be seen dead with anything less than either an obscure boutique brand headphone that Joe Blogs has never heard of, or something top of the range from the likes of Sennheiser. They roll their eyes and laugh at Beats and Bose users now. They will also have a 'wardrobe' of headphones, different types for different music or moods. They probably spend more on a stand to display a pair of headphones than 'normal' people spend on the headphones! (*Ouch! – Ed*)

### Mixing Your Drugs Up A Bit

The Box Swappers are serious addicts but often in denial. On first impression they don't seem to have a problem at all, you visit their house and they have a well put together but not outlandish hifi. Then you pop round a couple of weeks later and you swear it looks and sounds different, then the week after there is something else different. 'Oh, the speakers? I'm just auditioning them.' They may actually be a hifi reviewer, which is

**The Tweakers  
are a strange  
bunch, like the  
wild eyed  
hippy that still  
thinks they  
are in an acid  
daze of the  
60s, they can  
be found  
obsessively  
practicing  
strange  
rituals.**

really just a genius way to both legitimise and to fuel their box swapping obsession for free, there is a new high all the time.....and it's perfectly legal! A High-End Box Swapper is just as addicted to the buzz of spending eye watering-ly huge chunks of money as they are to the actual gear and music.

Like the city exec popping out for a champers-and-a-line-of-cheeky lunch, they will accept only the best and only buy new, they sniff out the latest and most expensive wares in the showroom...dealers love them. The more common Box Swapper goes second hand or 'vintage' and can be found crying in a corner because their latest sale on Ebay fell through and now they can't afford that 1980's Quad amp they were after. They are also likely to fall prey to the ruthless Ebay scammer because, even though deep down they know that that listing for a pair of B&W Nautilus at £500 is a scam, they still want to believe that they actually stand a chance of owning a pair. They try to justify their addiction by saying they are a 'collector' but we all know they are hoarding junkies.

### Cable Junkies

There are a whole load of addicts that have a very specific addiction to one particular part of their hifi. On the face of things they seem to have everything under control, they seem to have had the same system for years, but underneath they are frantically upgrading and changing the parts that you might never no-



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## BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

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tice, like the cables or the valves, or the tonearm and cartridge. The Cable Junkie has probably spent more on cables than they have on their electronics, if you look carefully you may find something resembling a python that has just dined on a baby goat, hiding behind their system. In fact, another way to spot the Cable Junkie is at a hifi show. Most of their time is spent, not sitting and listening, but inspecting the wires at the back of the demo system. Tube Rollers, like Cable Junkies are very specific, they delight in changing the valves or tubes in their equipment to improve the sound. Tube Rollers can become particularly obsessive in their search for the perfect tubes, tracking down vintage valves from eastern Europe at high prices. If you look at their photo's from a hifi show they will all be of softly glowing valves in darkened rooms.

### Tweaking

The Tweakers are a strange bunch, like the wild eyed hippy that still thinks they are in an acid daze of the 60s, they can be found obsessively practicing strange rituals. You are likely to find them aligning every screw in their listening room to point in the same direction, pin-

ning back the corners of their curtains and leaving small pieces of paper under their equipment. They tell themselves time and time again that they are going to quit, but they never do. They fall prey to weird and wonderful ranges of products that make massive claims of system improvement and baffle with science. They end up spending a small fortune on these 'tweaks' because they are scared that they might be missing out if they don't try them. If they have what looks like magic gravel near their hifi and a freezer full of CDs then they are in the grip of a full on Tweak addiction.

### Growing Your Own

There is a group that the dealers don't like, the DIYers. This group don't buy into the trap of buying hifi, oh no, they grow their own. They are frequently found sneering at the gear at hifi shows and in showrooms proclaiming that they can make, in their own shed no less, something that will sound infinitely better than the item before them that is the product of several years R and D, designed by the finest and most talented designers, involves cutting edge technology and has been handmade by master

craftsmen. If their hifi has an air of 'unfinishedness' about it and they frequently say 'you paid HOW MUCH?!' then they are probably a Serial DIYer.

### Pusherman

What about the dealers? They know their market, they have to, there is serious competition out there. They need to know just what each of their customers is addicted to, when to pull out a new range of exotic mains cables, when to drop into conversation the newly released American valve amps that they have arriving. If they are good they will have a carefully selected range of products, like an Amsterdam coffee shop, but their drugs are French loudspeakers, German turntables and British cables. The dealer though is just as likely to be an addict as their client. They haven't heeded the old adage, 'don't get high on your own supply'. They spend their spare time at hifi shows, lusting over new product ranges and trying not to show those higher up the chain, the distributors and the producers, just how excited they are, trying to play it cool, get the best deal....just like the rest of us.

**Linette Smith**



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# DEALERS VIEW

HIFI AND AUDIO FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF A DEALER...BY  
MIKE TWOMEY

**“T**<sup>his</sup> **Mike Twomey continues his series of articles looking at the wonderful world of audio from the dealers perspective and this month offers up a few useful tips on how to get the best trade in deal when it comes round to the inevitable upgrade time...**

was state-of-the art at the time. Dual-well player with auto reverse..Dolby noise reduction. It can play all manner of tapes including metal!”

My customer was doing his very best to convince me that this twenty three year old Nakamichi cassette deck was worth \$300. His forced enthusiasm was wearing thin even on himself.

“I think I paid over \$1000 for it. It’s been gently used. What do you say?”

Well fishermen would love it. It would drain water quickly. It would be a perfect drift anchor. Look, I understand you want a discount on these speakers. But this tape deck is worthless but there

may be a promising career for you in advertising.

All of us just love to play with the whole concept of *value*. Whole industries have grown out of the concept of negotiating value. We won’t mention Barristers and Attorneys who exist solely for the purpose of resolving disputes

when two parties can’t agree on value.

Our hobby, our passion, all manner of AV gear seems to be an exercise of a bridge too far; meaning we can afford “x” but we really really want “y”. Dealers see this every day. I spent a week at a major audio show in the US recently.

## DEALERS VIEW

HIFI AND AUDIO FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF A DEALER...BY  
MIKE TWOMEY

One of our customers tagged along with us. Dealers got the honor of explaining to the manufacturers why we had or had not met their product quotas, while the customer gleefully went out to the hundreds of rooms of audio gear being shown. Eight hours later, he was back talking about the amazing new speakers he had heard and the new electronics. I knew where this discussion was going. First the divide and conquer theory came out.

"I talked to Sara (a newbie employee) about your taking back those speakers I bought last year."

Did you now? What did Sara say?

"She said it would look good for you to be the first dealer to sell a pair of the new series"

Interesting.

"She said she would talk to you about giving me a good deal on a trade-in of those speakers"

Why don't we do this? Let's grab a beer and talk this through. What occurred during the next two hours was a back and forth based on economic realities of the Audio world. I explained that his 18 month old speakers depreciate. This is true of most things. The price I offer for the trade-in has lots of thoughts factored in. How much of a market is there for his used speaker? How long will I have to sit on them be-

fore I can sell them? How will he pay for the new speakers and...most importantly is this a loyal repeat customer whose business is worth the effort to accommodate him.

Most AV dealers are well familiar with discounting to customers. Policies are written. Speeches are given. Websites spring up dealing in used and discounted gear.

Trade-ins are viewed as discounts by your dealer. So here are a few guidelines to consider before you visit with your local dealer with your trade-in gear in tow.

- If you want to trade-in something be aware that your dealer may or may not be interested in it. If he is not, don't take it personally. So first ask yourself does this dealer carry the line that I want to trade-in? Is my gear in good shape? Does it function properly?
- You know that you would recover more money if you tried to sell your used equipment yourself. Yes it can be troublesome to do but it will certainly be worth your time.
- If you want a good value on your trade-in be *reasonable* in your price expectations. This is especially true of home theater electronics. The technology is changing rapidly. Older Processors without HDMI inputs

are worth more as door stops than as a trade-in to a dealer.

Unfortunate?..Yes. Reality?

Absolutely

- Certain brands do have more weight in the market place and retain a higher percentage of their purchase price. The ultra-expensive speaker brands tend to be in this club. But remember, someone who is spending 50,000 Euros on a pair of speakers looks at other factors in her or his decision. How are the financial markets behaving currently and what is his net cash position? Buying elite audio gear will be covered in a future article.

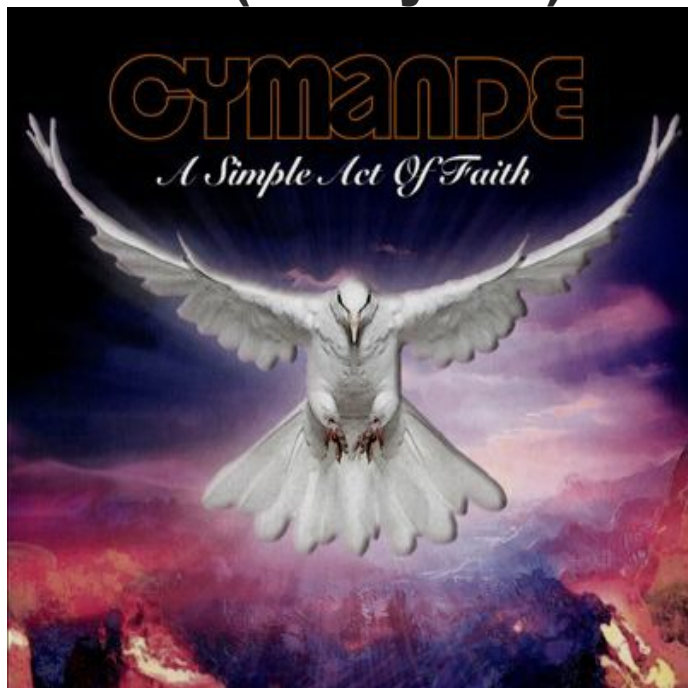
- The key walk away here is this. If you want the best possible pricing from your dealer be a *loyal* Tell your dealer about what you would like to do now and in the future. And actually follow through and do it. Dealers respond to repeat business and usually give their best pricing to those customers. One time Charlies never get discounts. We try to help customers with trade-ins by listing them in our monthly newsletter. This seems to help to move the products for the customer.

Mike Twomey owns [Big Kids Toys AV](#) located in Greensboro North Carolina. His net cash position is about \$4.76 at the moment.



# MUSIC REVIEWS

## Cymande – A Simple Act Of Faith (Cherry Red)



Some readers will know the name Cymande (*Sah Mahn Day*) from their three albums (Cymande, Second Time Round and Promised Heights) released in the early to mid-seventies, whilst others will be aware of some of their tunes (The Message) via samples used by De La Soul, Gang Starr and others.

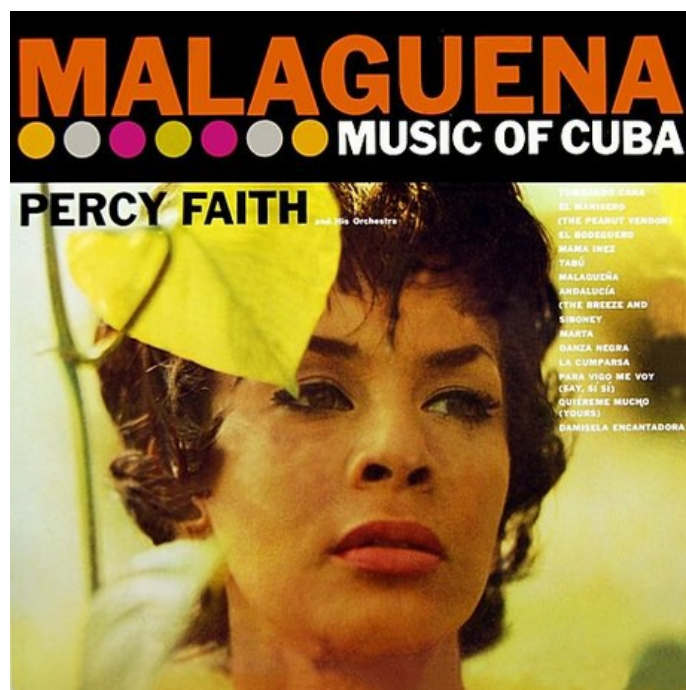
Formed in London in 1971 Cymande are a band that fuse funk, jazz, African music, reggae and blues and A Simple Act Of Faith represents their first album in four decades, reuniting original band members Patrick Patterson and Steve Scipio (and others) with original producer John Schroeder, to whose Janus (US) and Alaska (UK) labels the band were initially signed.

A simple Act Of Faith has ten new tunes, all recorded in the UK, with original sessions going back to 2011 and is out now on Cherry Red. It's an interesting record that will appeal to lovers of the broad genre that is funk, but is a more laidback affair and, whilst bass lines and the rhythm section propel the groove, I can't help feeling it's missing a little bit of power and

punch. Perhaps this is missing the point a bit on my part and this is a bit of a grower of a record that, being a bit different to the norm, takes a bit of getting used to. Cymande offer up a chilled groove for 2015 that is a melting pot of genres, played very well indeed for a band that haven't recorded together for 40 years but I can't help feeling that it is a groove trying to appeal to too broad a congregation.

Stuart Smith

## Percy Faith “Malaguena: The Music Of The Cuba & Kismet: Music From The Broadway Production” (él)



It's that time of the month again when I eagerly open the padded envelope containing a CD from record label él. I say this every time I review one of their offerings, but it's a great experience not really knowing what you are going to get. And so here we have Percy Faith “Malaguena: The Music Of The Cuba/Kismet: Music From The Broadway Production”... so two albums on one CD essentially.

# MUSIC REVIEWS

Percy Faith is a Canadian conductor who was a child prodigy and widely recognised as one of the founding fathers of the easy listening genre. Later in life, in the fifties, he became the musical director of Columbia Records and recorded loads of concept albums, help salvage the ailing careers of Tony Bennett and Rosemary Cloony and put Johnny Mathis and Doris Day in the charts.

Malaguena is, as you would expect, full of Latin rhythms and HUGE orchestral productions that sound absolutely wonderful on the main rig. It's cinematic and overblown, glamorous and exotic in its wide-screen stereo format and is a real treat. OK, this is not my usual listening fodder but who cares; it is such a delightfully thrilling musical experience in its own right. Trumpets blast and trombones explode over an infectious groove that must have been a real spectacle to see live.

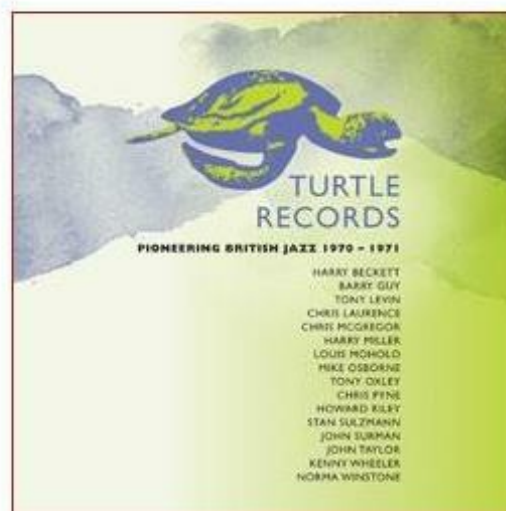
Kismet changes continent and musical style as you'd expect and here is delivered in the original mono recording. It's still a big production and sounds fab with the opening tune "Sands Of Time" having a wonderfully haunting female "vocal" laid over a lush arrangement...the following track "Stranger In Paradise" follows a similar theme, whereas Zubbediya, Samari's Dance is a much more upbeat affair. Like Malaguena, Kismet manages to throw up exotic images in the mind's eye, but here you are guided more with luxuriant strings and that haunting female vocal.

This CD is not going to be to everyone's taste, él CDs seldom are, but as always they deliver on daring to be different and here the musical content is really rather splendid!

Out now!

**Stuart Smith**

## Turtle Records – Pioneering British Jazz 1970-1971



Peter Eden produced twenty albums between 1968 and 1972, which were labelled "progressive British jazz", for labels such as Deram, Harvest, Argo and Island, but he also released three albums on his own Turtle Records imprint in 1970 and 1971 and it is these three recordings we have here.

The trio of CDs here on RPM are Mike Osbourne's "Outback", Howard Riley's "Flight" and John Taylor's "Pause and Think Again" which apparently command over £800 if you were to buy the originals. This is the first time these albums have been reissued officially and they are remastered from the original tapes.

The package comes in a nice box with a 17000 word booklet by Colin Harper which includes interviews from many of the musicians involved on the records and loads of photographs too. It's a nicely produced document.

## MUSIC REVIEWS

Mike Osborne's "Outback" is an album of just two tunes (So it is and Outback) and is what I would class as pretty 'challenging' jazz...certainly not an easy listening record by any stretch of the imagination. However, the musicianship is not in question but as a recent convert to the genre I found it a bit much musically...jazz heads will no doubt be glaring daggers at their screens now and yelling infidel but there's no accounting for taste and all that.

Howard Riley's "Flight" is in a similarly "interesting" vein and even a little more "out there" than the Mike Osborne album. Actually, this is more of a record that resonates with me as it happens, despite it being a little out of my musical comfort zone. Yes it is experimental and progressive but there are attention-grabbing effects being used and I'm reminded in parts of Jimi Hendrix. Again, certainly not an easy or comfort-

able listen, but who says music has to be undemanding...

And so onto John Taylor's "Pause And Think Again" which is perhaps the most accessible of the three albums herein and the most conventional in terms of musical content and structure...but not that much. It's still a record that will challenge most people's perception of what constitutes music and what is noise made with musical instruments...as the previous two do.

OK, here's the thing...I'm a bit of a noob to all this jazz malarkey and I find this kind of music pretty hard going to be honest. However, I know this kind of Jazz has its diehard fans and it is to this group that this box set will surely appeal.

Out Now!

**Stuart Smith**

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## LIVE

# The Proclaimers – The Playhouse, Edinburgh



**C**raig and Charlie Reid have come along way since they signed off the dole in a bleak benefit office on Edinburgh's west side and signed onto the government's Enterprise Allowance Scheme, with which they helped to fund the first six months of their musical career as The Proclaimers . Ten albums, a musical and a

film based on their songs, and a track in the Shrek soundtrack later, they are playing the second of two sold out gigs on their home turf, there's a pre-Christmas buzz in the Edinburgh air and a palpable sense of

**Edinburgh loves its own and when the brothers take the stage accomplished by their band, the roof threatens to come off.**

excitement in the auditorium.

First to the stage though is The Pete Williams Band whose opening song reminds me of the Seventies pub-rock sound of Brinsley Schwartz without the keyboards. Pub-rock got a bit of a bad reputation once punk came along but it was in fact highly melodic with influences from rock and roll,

rhythm and blues and country music and doesn't deserve its tarnished reputation. It transpires that Pete Williams was a founding, and still occasional, member of Dexys Midnight Runners – he doesn't tell us this, I

## LIVE

committed the cardinal sin of mid-gig Googling – but once you know, a slight similarity to Kevin Rowland’s vocals becomes obvious. Williams avoids Rowland’s histrionics and idiosyncrasies though. Also, while Dexys music often strayed into artifice, seeming more like musical theatre, Williams keeps it all about the music. He comes across as a thoroughly likeable bloke and his set goes down well with the audience. When I got home I gave his new album *Roughnecks and Roustabouts* a listen and can highly recommend it.

And so to the main event. This is the first time I’ve seen The Proclaimers live. One morning last year I walked past Craig on the way to the dentist’s but I don’t suppose that counts. I was on the way to the dentist’s, by the way, not him. Well, he may have been on the way to the dentist’s but if he was, it wasn’t my dentist. Sorry, I digress.

Edinburgh loves its own and when the brothers take the stage accomplished by their band, the roof threatens to come off. From the first line of *The Sky Takes The Soul* from their debut album, *This Is The Story*,

it’s clear that of the 3000 people here tonight, 2999 of them are going to sing along and be word perfect with every song. Three songs in, if the wind has been in the right direction, it seems entirely likely that *Letter From America* was heard somewhere in Wisconsin.

*Sunshine On Leith* is as good as a song as been written by anyone ever. My heart was broken, My heart was broken; eight words in two lines, delivered with a devastating economy that contains worlds of meaning. We are less than 2 miles from the heart of Leith tonight and hearing Craig and Charlie sing this really is one of those shivers up the spine moments, bolstered by a beautiful steel guitar solo from Zac Ware.

A night of top tunes is inevitably topped off by a storming rendition of *I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)*. I’m left wondering how any encore is ever going to be able to match that but *Make My Heart Fly*, *Joyful Kilmarnock Blues* and *Life With You* show me how, leaving the audience clamouring for more after the house lights go up. The Proclaimers may have come far but it’s good to have them home.

**John Scott**





**LIVE**

## Spizzenergi / The Rezillos – The Liquid Room, Edinburgh



**S**pizzenergi are remembered principally for two things: their 1979 single *Where's Captain Kirk?*; the first single to top the UK indie chart where it remained at number one for seven weeks, and their tendency to change names at the drop of a hat. Starting as Spizzoil, lead singer Spizz went on to lead a variety of line-ups as Spizzenergi, Athletico Spizz 80, The Spizzles, SpizzOrwell, and Spizz And The Astronauties amongst others.

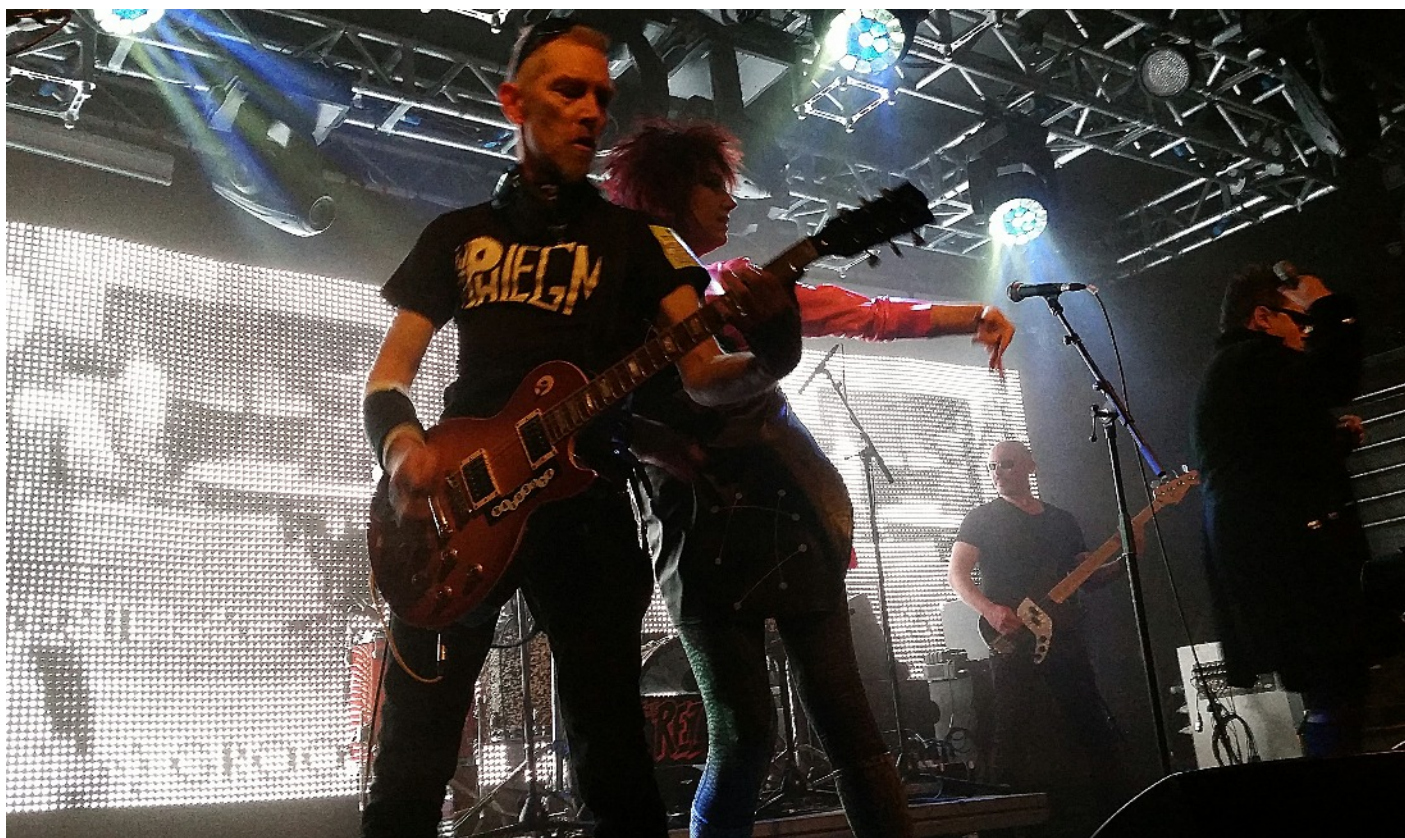
The latest incarnation of Spizzenergi comprises Spizz and a motley collection of cartoon rockers with a fondness for throwing some clichéd rock and roll shapes but produce a really tight, energetic sound. Spizz takes the stage dressed like a Poundshop version of a character from the 1982 version of *Tron*, decked out in lights and waving a laser pointer around. Thankfully, Spizz and his band aren't taking them-

selves too seriously. Highlights of the band's set include *Soldier, Soldier*, *European Heroes*, *Clocks Are Big* and of course *Where's Captain Kirk?* A suitably Spizzenergetic encore of Roxy Music's *Virginia Plain* tops off a really entertaining set.

The Rezillos formed in Edinburgh in 1976 on the back of the wave of energy engendered by punk. Eschewing anger and political messages, the band considered themselves to be a new wave beat group, drawing on Sixties influences. Their debut album *Can't Sand The Rezillos*, released in 1978, is rightly considered something of a classic, full to the brim of great hooks, great playing and a sympathetic production courtesy of Tony Bongiovi (cousin of Jon Bon Jovi) and the now legendary Bob Clearmountain at New York's Power Station studios.



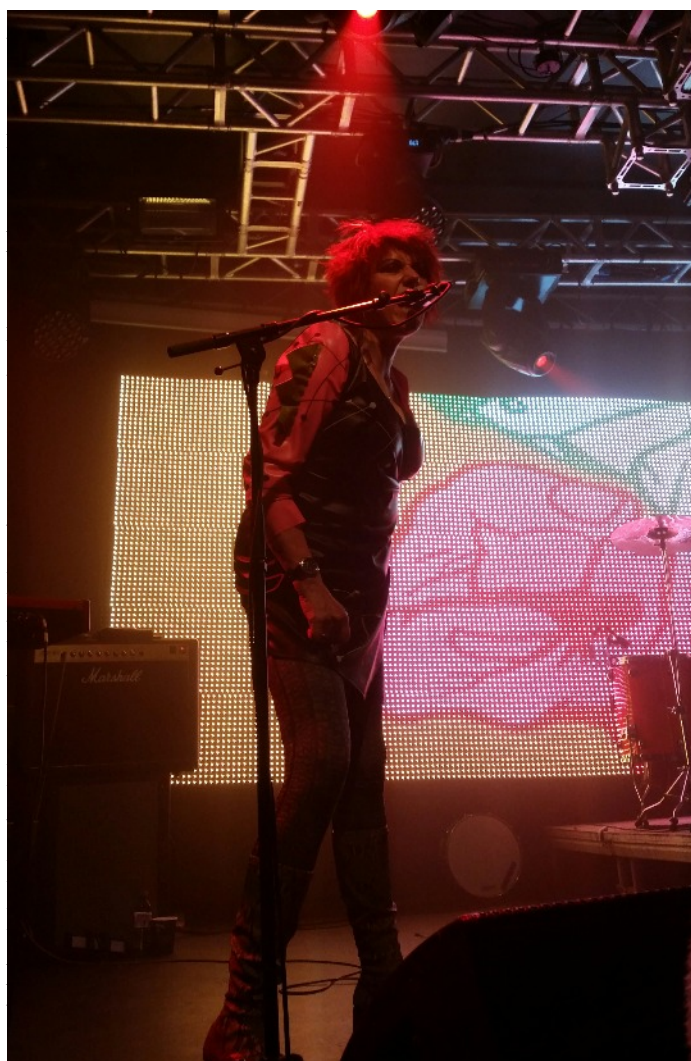
## LIVE



Mired in internal disputes, the band split up 4 months after the release of the album, guitarist Jo Callis eventually going on to bigger things as part of The Human League. Earlier this year, original Rezillos Fay Fife, Eugene Reynolds and Angel Paterson returned to the studio with new members Chris Agnew and Jim Brady on bass and guitar for a somewhat tardy second album, *Zero*.

While The Rezillos take the business of being in a band seriously, their music is all about fun. The walk on music from Sixties TV puppet sci-fi show *Stingray* sets the tone perfectly and the band launch into *I Can't Stand my Baby* from the debut album. The setlist mixes tracks from both albums and it says a lot for the songs on the new album that they are able to hold their own with the classics.

For me, one of the defining elements of *Can't Stand* The Rezillos was the driving, melodic bass playing of William Mysterious (Alastair Donaldson) who sadly passed away in 2013. Chris Agnew nails this and with Angel Paterson's drumming provides a solid founda-





# LIVE



see what The Rezillos might come up with in another 35 years, let's hope we don't have to wait that long to find out.

## SETLIST:

I Can't Stand My Baby  
(Take Me To The) Groovy Room  
Flying Saucer Attack  
Sorry About Tomorrow  
Spike Heel Assassin  
Tiny Boy  
Mystery Action  
Bad Guy Reaction  
Life's A Bitch  
Zero  
No  
It Gets Me  
Top of the Pops  
(My Baby Does) Good Sculptures  
River Deep, Mountain High  
Destination Venus

## Encore

Getting Me Down  
Someone's Gonna Get Their Head Kicked in Tonight

**John Scott**

storm through it to bring a tremendous performance to a triumphant close. While it would be interesting to

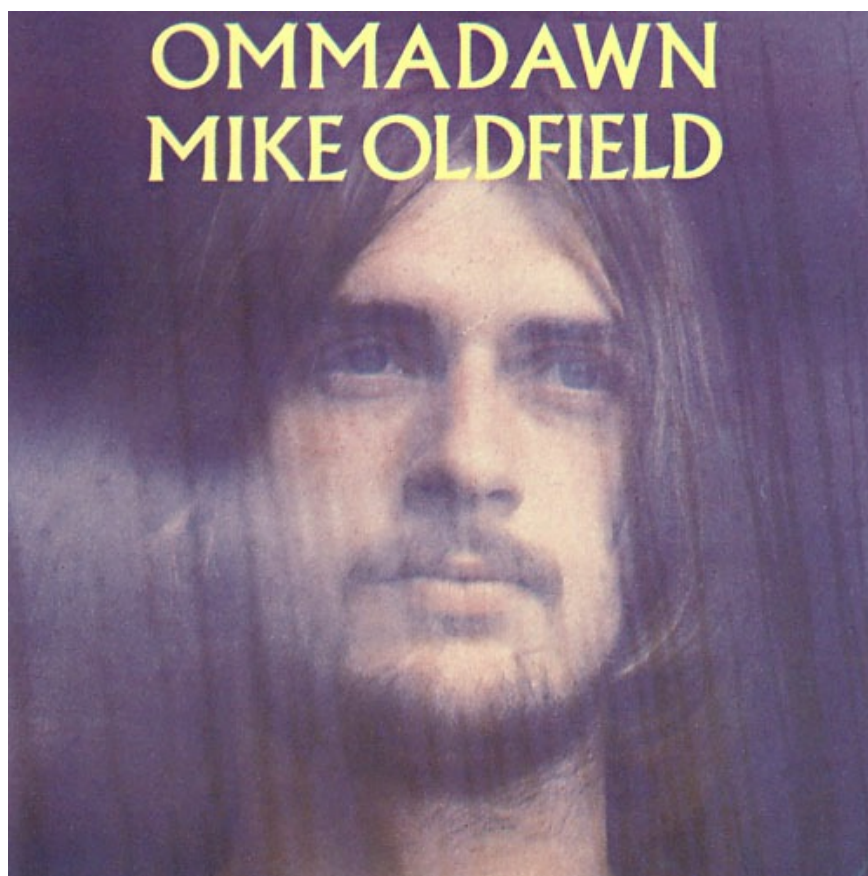
## CLASSICS

# Ommadawn – Mike Oldfield

**John Scott throws a log on the fire, pours himself a wee dram and puts on his copy of Mike Oldfield's Ommadawn as part of his Classic Albums series of reviews.**

**S**ome albums seem to be wedded to a particular time of year – for me, The Incredible String Band's Wee Tam is a summer album and as much as I love it, it doesn't get many plays between September and June. Similarly, Ommadawn has always been a winter album for me and is best enjoyed when it is cold and dark outside, in front of a log fire, or at least with the central heating is cranked up, and a glass of something warming.

I first encountered Ommadawn back in 1976 when it was released as part of "Boxed", a boxed set of Mike Oldfield's first three albums along with an extra disc of odds and ends and collaborations. Boxed was one of my gateway albums to "grown up" music as opposed to the chart pop that I had weaned myself on. Marathon listening



sessions ensued in which I immersed myself in Oldfield's Tubular Bells, Hergest Ridge and Ommadawn. While I grew to love them all, Ommadawn became a favourite and remains so to this day.

Tubular Bells had, of course, launched Virgin Records and become an instant classic; a must-have



# CLASSICS

record for any serious collection. The album had thrust painfully shy Oldfield into a spotlight that he had no desire to be illuminated by. Retreat- ing into the country and under pressure to produce a follow up, Oldfield re- leased Hergest Ridge within a year of his debut album. In hindsight, Hergest Ridge is a bold, adventurous album but it couldn't like up to the expectations of its prede-

## For me, Ommadawn is the perfect distillation of Oldfield's talents. If you have never explored beyond Tubular Bells, it is well worth your time.

cessor and was viewed as something of a damp squib at the time. Ommadawn followed a year later but this time Oldfield, who was prone to bouts of depres- sion, had clearly tried to exorcise some of the de- mons brought on by his sudden fame and had poured his heart into his latest composition.

If Tubular Bells is an exercise in thematic variations and Hergest Ridge an impressionistic tone poem de-

featured other musicians. Oldfield continues to play the bulk of the instruments on Ommadawn but the album features contributions on vocals, percussion, uilleann pipes, panpipes and trumpet from other mu- sicians. The Hereford City Brass Band makes a fleeting, though effective, appearance as well.

Ommadawn is a piece in two parts, as had been Tu- bular Bells and Hergest Ridge, necessitated no doubt

picting the landscape of the Hereford countryside around Oldfield's home, influenced by modern minimalist composers such as Terry Riley and Philip Glass, Ommadawn is a much more organic piece, pulling on Celtic influences and African rhythms. Oldfield had garnered a reputation as a one man band multi-in- strumentalist although in truth both Tubular Bells and Hergest Ridge had

### Mike Oldfield • Ommadawn

and later without any great enthusiasm. Indeed, Mike Oldfield's Ommadawn was a reluctant return to the studio after a year of retreat. The album was a much more organic piece, pulling on Celtic influences and African rhythms. Oldfield had garnered a reputation as a one man band multi-instrumentalist although in truth both Tubular Bells and Hergest Ridge had featured other musicians. Oldfield continues to play the bulk of the instruments on Ommadawn but the album features contributions on vocals, percussion, uilleann pipes, panpipes and trumpet from other musicians. The Hereford City Brass Band makes a fleeting, though effective, appearance as well.

Ommadawn is a piece in two parts, as had been Tubular Bells and Hergest Ridge, necessitated no doubt

# CLASSICS

by the format of the vinyl LP. A gentle, tinkling introduction featuring acoustic guitars, wordless vocals and a growling electric bass sets the tone for what is to come. This is a much warmer, more grounded album than either of its predecessors. This opening theme is briefly developed and returns again at the end of part one. Developing into a mini-climax featuring the Hereford City Band, this opening theme moves to a jig-like movement and then a musical box interlude. The musical box theme morphs into another featuring nonsense lyrics chanted by vocalists Clodagh Simonds, Bridget St John and Oldfield's sister Sally. Oldfield had asked Simonds to come up with some meaningless phrases. Simonds wrote down some words and then asked a friend to translate these into Irish Gaelic. One of the words, idiot, translated as amadán which was then re-anglicised as ommadawn, giving the piece its title. This section builds slowly and relentlessly on a bed of African drums leading to one of the most intense guitar solos ever committed to tape. Oldfield wrings every drop of emotion out of his guitar, ending on a screaming note, leaving the drums to end part one like a fading heartbeat.

Part two opens with a swarming mass of overdubbed guitars playing a tumbling, descending melody until an acoustic guitar solo lifts the mood upwards again. At the age of 15 Oldfield had formed a folk duo with his sister Sally. The pair released an album, *Children Of The Sun* in 1968. A Sad Song For Rosie, an unreleased track from the album, forms the basis of the next section of *Ommadawn*, played on uilleann pipes by The Chieftain's Paddy Maloney. A transitional section takes us to another epic guitar solo that brings *Ommadawn* to a close; joyous this time rather than the emotionally searing solo that ended part one.

That's not quite the end though *On Horseback* is a short simple song, complete with children's choir, about the joys of horse riding in the countryside.

While not adding anything to what has gone before, it is charming in its naivety.

A deluxe version of *Ommadawn* was released in 2011 with a new mix by Oldfield accompanying the original mix, a "lost" demo version and a clutch of contemporary pieces including hit single *In Dulce Jubilo* and *First Excursion* which was one of several contributions that Oldfield had made to compositions by English composer David Bedford. The remix brings out some details that had previously lurked in the background and adds a little sonic sparkle but also removes the contribution by the Hereford City Band, which I personally think is a poor decision. Still, I have the option of the original mix as well.

For me, *Ommadawn* is the perfect distillation of Oldfield's talents. If you have never explored beyond *Tubular Bells*, it is well worth your time.

**John Scott**

## AT A GLANCE

**Released– 21st October 1975**

**Recorded – The Beacon, January–September 1975**

**Genre – Prog Rock/World/Folk**

**Length – 36' 41"**

**Label – Virgin**

**Producer – Mike Oldfield**

### TRACK LISTING

**1. Ommadawn {Part One}**

**2. Ommadawn {Part Two}**

## BEHIND THE BRANDS

**Heinz Lichtenegger is the CEO and President of Project Audio Systems, is an absolute audio and music fanatic and here talks to Hifi Pig about his history, his system and where he thinks the industry is headed.**



### **Your History**

**Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?**

There was not just one single person. Many important relationships drove me in this industry.

My music teacher, who let me understand classical music and showed me not only the difference in sound, but also interpretation. How does Callas perform, Leonthyn Price, Birgid Nilson and Anna Netrebko,!

Music experiences in General, the huge sound of Pink Floyd. Hearing Monty Alexander and Ray Brown 5 meters in front in a Club in Boston etc etc.

....and great personalities in this industry. Renaud de Vergnette founder of Triangle, Anthony Michalson from MF, Paul Klipsch, Jean Constant Verdier, Dan d Agostino and many more!

It's a great business full of individuals and emotions

**Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?**

Definitely the Debut, it changed the world of analogue. These products brought analogue listening again to many people and not only to audiophiles.

It was the first analogue product after the CD boom that was sold in volume. It's a lifestyle Icon and one of the most sold and awarded high-end products in the hifi industry.



## BEHIND THE BRANDS

[Today my most important product is the MAIA, a small integrated amp which sounds marvellous like a tube amp and has all the inputs you need. But also it is modern and has Usb and Bluetooth, but also for sure phono. Just perfect for a young starter who has a small flat (what they typical have) and want to get to the experience of true Hifi stereo!

By the way, that's the reason why I started my company, to give as many people as possible the magic of hifi stereo at the lowest possible price, but not plastic! And the Debut and the MAIA are just that!

### **What product do you wish you had never conceived/launched?**

Wow, difficult question. There have been many prototypes which we have been working on and some did not sound good and some have been too expensive. So we never did them. I cannot recall any product we ever had that was bad and actually launched

and every product has been just right at the time... and all are my babies

### **Tell Hifi Pig readers about your next project and what they can expect in the future from you and your company.**

We are working in many directions, so for sure we want to always do better turntables and improve the designs in all direction. Like now, the RPM Carbon where we for the first time combined the advantages of Carbon, MDF and Metal in one chassis.

There are many new materials being produced which we are studying and from which we believe we can soon make better and better products...stay tuned, some materials are really high Tech.

So getting the product better, but also cheaper and nicer to attract more people to analogue is a big goal for us! But we are also working on concepts which



# BEHIND THE BRANDS

will combine the comfort of the digital world with analogue.

In the electronic world we want to offer the latest streaming technology as well a high-end performance out of a compact easy to use box.

We are the first company in the highend community to offer all sources (analogue, streaming, Bluetooth, CD, Radio, PC audio) and offer a full system control via the Box Control app via a smartphone, even the volume motor pot and the CD player as well!

We will develop more products which are pure audiophile from the sound concept but offer easier use!!!!

## You and your system

My first system was hugely important as it was the start of my career

Most of the time my business career was also influenced by what equipment I had privately, or let say private and business was never separated!!! Therefore I have to answer your question with parts of my business career,

Instead of a motorcycle (which everybody bought at that time at 16 with their first money) I bought a hifi system. Everybody was declaring me crazy!

It was a more commercial all in one system but with a separate turntable (that was the best bit) ...a Dual 505 and Dual Cartridge!

First I changed the cartridge to a Shure, but I did not get out the sound I was looking for, so I looked for more but my money was limited! Very limited!

For sure therefore I had to start with used highend products – my first true high-end products were Tannoy Cheviot loudspeakers and a JVC Monster receiver!

Then later, after I moved to Vienna, I switched the Dual to an early LinnLP 12 with a Grace 707 arm and AKG P8 cartridge ...and I moved into my first

flat -1 bed, 1 refrigerator and a perfectly positioned hifi system.what a joy!

Again i wanted more. I started to work in THE high-end store in Vienna, and i realized that the speaker I wanted (Tannoy Buckingham) but I never was never able to afford and so the only solution to get the best was to get the best headphone, which at that time was the Stax Sigma.

As taping was big, because records were expensive I got a Nakamichi 680 ZX

The turntable switched to Stad 2 from Le Talec which was one of the first mass loaded turntables at that time, which was affordable (this was also the time for Goldmunds and Lurnes versus the British designs like Roksan, Mantra, or Pink Triangle).

That system I had for a while, because I started my own business out of my flat!

As all my customer in the beginning were friends, but without money, so I was working more on getting the best sound out of a cheap system than on my high-end system.

My base starter system has been always a turntable, a speaker and an amp. Thats it.

Nad 3020, Dual 505, Thorens 166, Mourdant short MS 20, Wharfedale Dimond etc. which gave a much better sound than a Fisher hifi tower with Equalizer, 1000 w and VU instruments and more lights then sound:

I got very successful pretty quickly, but I had a problem with high prices in Austria (everything was always 30% more expensive than in Germany or UK) and so I started to import products and looked around the world for the best products. In the beginning low cost products, but later high-end brands.

My first product was Triangle from France who had a Monitor called Minimum that had a similar sound to Linn Kans, but were a third of the price. I found

# BEHIND THE BRANDS

Musical Fidelity as the perfect match with their A 1 and B1 amps... what a fantastic sound in small rooms. Not too much bass, but everything else was just perfect!

BUT i missed a turntable!!! All the ones I liked got expensive and so I found my own, but that's for later and another part of the story.

I imported more and more brands that were low price but also mid and high-end stuff. Finally I finished with retail and established a distribution company called Audiotuning for distributing hifi brands in Austria. Today AT is by far the largest distribution company in Austria, handling about 60 brands, all very good established brands.

Why am I telling you all this?

I had almost every component you can imagine in my home. You name it, I had it! I had them to either check how good they sounded, to decide if I want to distribute it or not, or simple because I liked it. For example my collection of record players is 65 and as for cartridges I don't know anymore how much or how many, I lost count!

Over time I collected huge experience in audio products, learning many different technologies and ideas and this helped me also to design my own products, (we have many wonderful engineers in the company, but the base idea and final sound check and decision is still down to me).

Today I have 4 systems in my home:

The reference system are Triangle Grand Concerto, AR Ref 250 monos/or Agostino Momentum Monos,, AQ or Nordost cabling, AR Ref 10 pre, different assortment of phonostages, but mostly either EAT e go, or phonobox RS with Powerbox Phono. (battery powersupply)

Turntables I mostly use are Eat Forte with Graham Elite (new arm) or PJ signature (easy to change all

my cartridges) or my old all-time favourite Platin Verider, in different 12 inch arm variations. (PJ Carbon, Sme)

## **What component/product do you miss the most/wish you had never got rid of?**

I never really missed a product because all products are compromises and there is no truth or absolute. In some combinations they work, in others not, that's the magic of high-end for me!!! Therefore there exists 2000 speaker producers and all are somehow right depending how you listen to music and what your aim is.

Therefore the technician alone, with all knowledge in the world cannot make the perfect system by measuring alone.

I am happy that there are so many fantastic products out there.

## **How often do you listen to music?**

I listen every day to music. It's THE most important part of my life except for my wife, but she is hifi freak too. Even my seat at the dinner table is exactly between the speakers. So no dinner without music, but for sure I have a Sofa in front of the dinner table with the perfect positioning!

I have 25 000 records and I listen 98% of the time to analogue only!!! I'm very much into classical music but for sure lots of Jazz and Rock, especially psychedelic... not so much Pop!

## **What's your view on the valve renaissance of the past 20 years or so?**

There is no really renaissance of valves like in analogue valves are still a super minority community in the audio market. I love valves, most of my systems are valve based and I try to put where ever its economical valves in my products (Tube Box S, DS and all the RS products are valve)



# BEHIND THE BRANDS

However it's for the hardcore music lovers! That's it...ask my wife. She owns EAT, one of the last companies who really make handmade tubes...a difficult way. All want to have the best sound but the reliability of a transistor cannot be equalled with valves! When you drive a Maserati or a Ferrari you know that the service prices are the real cost. In tubes everybody wants to enjoy but not pay for it. We have to rethink this industry and give credit where it is deserved. Tubes are jewels, high tech instruments like watches. (I can write much more about this topic and the misleading direction the industry is going, with false promises the customers are given!)

## **Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?**

Many people ask me about why vinyl was coming back and I believe there are many many reasons, but the main one is lifestyle. Vinyl is simple, so wonderfully relaxing after all your hard work and you take your time and listen to your favourite records.

You need to CARE!!!

People in the Mp 3 world forgot this and when they discover this experience of relaxing and the GREAT sound they are blown away. It's the contra point to the world which is turning faster and faster. It's touch, feel, smell, see AND listen...so much more than every other medium.

And its sounds great... DIFFERENT.

Fortunately and that's now the audiophile part. Analog needs good equipment and attention to perform best. So it's THE Gem for all people who care more about their system. It so much more rewarded than with any other source, so any new vinyl lover is likely also to become an audio connoisseur.

And finally analogue is cheap, you get so many top records for very low price and a good record player which is high-end starts at very low cost ( less than

500) so it's high-class affordable for everyone, financially and emotionally.

## **Is CD a dying format?**

CD will go back to be a niche product and sales are fast decreasing and in 10 years they will be close to Zero... however, there are millions of CDS out there. Most will be recorded or ripped to hard disk, but there will be a good small hardware business, similar to analogue in the end of 90s.

Many CD player will break and people will not spend lots of money as before.

Our CD box RS (CD drive only as everybody has Dacs anyway) is a piece of high-end equipment and yet lower than 1000 Euros and it's one of my most asked for and demanded products!

## **What are your views on the state of the industry/where is it going/what will it look like in 5 years/what will typical systems look like?/What will happen to prices?/What will happen to the high end – will it carry on regardless?**

There will be no 44 cm, low cost products, all products will get smaller because you can make super sounding products in small cases and why spend a fortune on a case when all is empty inside They will become smaller because of modern digital electronics and SMD also!!

High-end will stay and will get more expensive, as sales numbers are small.

That's not the way we are going at Pro-Ject. We think high-end has nothing to do with price and it's more a question of attitude and the correct compromises being made. We have always been trying to make larger volumes, to keep it low cost, but without compromising the quality and without making our products in Far East!

We believe in analogue! STEREO will come back as opposed to the mass market wireless bluetooth

# BEHIND THE BRANDS

## SOUNDMACHINES

(also in the 70's they were wireless). Lots of people will realise that these products only produce ear-shaped noise and not real stereo (they are stereo, but because the speakers are so close together they are quasi mono).

We fight against this trend towards a plastic

sound and we believe that many people will soon realise how much more enjoyable it is to listen to REAL stereo than to one box audio. Analogue is the incarnation of STEREO Hifi. Please help us in this fight, because if we want that the High Audio is existing in future we must again convince the average consumer about the fascination of our hifi hobby, regardless of the price!

### How do we engage young people, the audiophiles of the future?

We make hifi affordable with nice colours, good sound and easy to use. We try to be present in all channels – highend stores, hifi stores, record stores, internet, chains, mass-market.

As you see more of our products the better, we don't like exclusivities, because most of the high-end products are too covered, too hidden. So nobody knows from the street that these products exist. We try to be open, not only a guru!

### How do you work?

I start with the premise that there is no real truth, it does not matter what system you are using, it depends how you handle it, with what care and how you set it up. The room has an effect, your musical



taste, how you like to listen, loud, soft, first row middle row...all these factors have an effect.

My taste changes a lot as well my mood. You can't say "that's the best", but you may say that a product has a certain level. Mr Bose and Mr Klipsch are the most honoured speaker designers (maybe not the best) and they say theoretically the total opposite (Bose, all is omnidirectional whereas Klipsch say the truth is only absolute and direct)

So simply said, listen and say what you like, that all that counts. And usually if you teach people how to listen consciously, they hear a big difference and create favour. It's like wine, what is better a white dry Riesling, or a sweet sauterne from Chateau Yquem, a Grand cru St Emilion, or a big burgundy....there is no right answer, it is down to taste and mood.

I tell you sometimes I prefer a simple Gruener Veltliner from my home, just as I sometimes prefer my simple system in my small 15 sqm room, with my small 200 euro 2 ways speaker against my 200 000 euro system.

It all depends... and that's what makes audio such an adorable, nice hobby.

**Many thanks Heinz for taking the time to talk to Hifi Pig.**